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❧ A Surprisingly ❧
Happy Engagement

for
the

Slime Duke

and
the

Fallen

Noble Lady



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“This book details how the
aurora pearls are cultivated.”

Gabriel opened it, revealing the
words “Confidential—Internal
Use Only” in bright-red letters.

Emilie de Ogre

One of the monster dukes—the ogre duke.
Despite her petite frame, her physical strength
puts grown men to shame.



Majestic pipe organ music filled the air as I walked inside.

Wibble and the other slimes helped me by lifting the back of my veil and the train of my dress.

Gabriel, who was waiting midway down the aisle, held out his hand to me.



“Now use my lap as a pillow.”

I removed my hand from his eyes and gazed down at his beautiful face.

I realized he was entrusting himself to me like this because he felt safe with me, and it made me love him even more.

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Prologue: The Fallen Noble Francette's Unexpectedly Happy Life

I, Francette de Blanchard, second daughter of Duke Mercœur, had my life take a dramatic turn when Crown Prince Mael rescinded his engagement to my older sister, Adele, on the groundless accusation that she had insulted his mistress. My sister was banished from the country, and our family fell into ruin.

My sister immediately left for the neighboring country, where our mother had formerly been an imperial princess. The crown prince there fell in love with her, and they got married, making her the crown princess. No one objected—not when she'd already overcome the strict training required to become queen. The two of them made a good couple.

However, that wasn't the story's happy ending. My mother and sister invited me to go to the Empire with them, but I declined. There, I knew I'd have a stabler life, and people would treat me with respect. But if a similar incident were to happen, throwing my position into jeopardy again, I would suffer the same pain. "Duke Mercœur's daughter," "the former princess's daughter," "the crown prince's sister-in-law"—it hurt to be evaluated based on titles alone, as if no one saw me for who I truly was. I decided that I would rather support myself even if it meant being impoverished, so I stayed in the country with my father, and we lived together in a one-story house in the old part of town.

Cooking, cleaning, laundry—all these chores used to be left to servants, and none of them went well when they became my responsibility. I would accidentally buy spoiled vegetables, eat undercooked meat and give myself an upset stomach, or slip on the wet floor after scrubbing it. There were many days when I felt depressed because everything was going wrong.

Meanwhile, my father was good at getting by—every day, he would go from one mistress to the next, living under their care. This worked in my favor, because if I had to take care of my father while already struggling just to survive by myself, I probably would've lost all hope. I was secretly grateful for his

mistresses.

As I grew accustomed to my new life, I started to earn money daily by making sweets—a skill I'd learned while doing charity work. I consigned them to a pastry store, and however many were sold, that was my income. The store owner sympathized with my family's situation and said I didn't need to pay the consignment fee.

My sweets didn't sell at first, but at some point, a regular customer began to buy them all up. Thanks to him, I was able to have a normal life. *From now on, I'll continue to live modestly with my duck, baking sweets in the old part of town*—or so I thought. Until the day came that I picked up a light-red slime that was lying by the road.

The slime was a talkative and delightful fellow, and it said its name was Wibble. It'd gotten separated from its owner, and the knights said I'd have to take care of it until said owner was found.

Wibble was an incredibly talented slime that could clean, do laundry, and assist with cooking. Having it around helped stave off the loneliness of living by myself. I knew these harmonious days wouldn't last forever—Wibble had an owner, after all—but I hoped that they would continue just a bit longer.

Unfortunately, even that small wish wasn't granted. I received a concerning letter from my father that said nothing but "Sorry." My bad premonition came true when I found out that, of all the things that could've happened, he'd run away with the wife of a wealthy merchant.

After that, a large group of thugs came to my home and demanded two hundred thousand geld as compensation. It was a large sum—the kind of amount a wealthy noble family would prepare for their daughter's dowry. I didn't even know where my father was, so I couldn't expect help from him, and there was no way I could pay it by myself.

In this moment of desperation, a savior appeared: a handsome young man named Gabriel, around twenty years old, with glasses and long, beautiful pearl-white hair tied in a ponytail. Not only did he defeat the thugs when they attacked me, he even paid the two-hundred-thousand-geld compensation in my stead. I also learned that he was the slime duke—one of the grand monster

dukes—and Wibble's owner.

Though the commotion was over, and Wibble's owner had been found, my relief was short-lived. How was I supposed to repay the two hundred thousand geld? I'd never be able to earn that much money, even if I worked for the rest of my life.

While I was at my wit's end, Gabriel made an unexpected suggestion: I could become his fiancée. Apparently all of his many marriage proposals had been rejected in the past. I couldn't imagine why someone would turn down a sincere, earnest, and calm man like him, but he explained to me—with an exasperated expression—that the land he governed was a lake region called Triste, where it rained all year round. Not only was it constantly damp and depressing, it was home to a large number of slimes.

I'd never been to a lake region before, so I didn't know what to think. All I knew was that I'd endured living in this house, which leaked every time it rained, so I'd probably be fine. It wasn't as if I were going to be able to find my father, and earning two hundred thousand geld was a difficult ask. Thus, I steeled my resolve and accepted the engagement.

And so, I became Gabriel's fiancée and moved to Triste. I was still his fiancée, not his wife, because my father was missing—a noble lady could not get married without her father's permission. But eventually, he was found, and my marriage to Gabriel was approved. Now we just needed to wait for the hubbub around my father's crime to calm down before we could have the wedding.

When I spoke to past acquaintances at a soiree, they were surprised to learn I was going to marry the slime duke of Triste. The region was a place that people avoided, so they probably just didn't know how wonderful it was. The misty rain that fell over the land was like a beautiful lace curtain. Gabriel had complained that it was damp all year round, but that didn't bother me. It was much more habitable than I'd expected.

Triste was also filled with unique individuals, like Gabriel's cheerful and energetic mother, Maria; my attendants, Nico, Coco, and Rico, who were triplets; and our beautiful steward in men's clothing, Constance. The residents

were all kindhearted people, and our days were peaceful. I wasn't the only one who felt this way about Triste. Even Prince Axel—dragon duke and heir to the throne—loved it, as did Princess Griselda and Lady Magritte, the siren duke.

I was determined to continue living an honest, upright, and earnest life so that I wouldn't bring shame to Gabriel.

Chapter 1: The Noble Lady Francette Prepares for the Wedding!

The seasons passed, dyeing the trees of Triste beautiful autumn colors. Every time I went for a walk in the garden, I'd find plants I'd never seen in the royal capital and hear the calls of migratory birds. Life here was relaxing and enjoyable, and I spent my happy days in peace.

My pastry store, the Lakeside Duck Bakery, was doing swimmingly, and I'd recently hired more people. Not only had I passed on my baking techniques, I'd also left the accounting to employees I could trust. This way, the business could function even if I wasn't available.

However, my moment of respite was cut short by my mother-in-law wanting to discuss the wedding. My marriage to Gabriel would've been approved either way, since Prince Axel had requested permission from the king on our behalf, but locating my missing father had made the process all the smoother. There were no longer any obstacles in our way, so we could begin the wedding preparations in earnest.

Normally, the bride's mother was supposed to help, but in my case, my mother-in-law was willing to fulfill that role instead. I had contacted my mother in the Empire about it, of course, but I would've felt bad making her travel back and forth so many times, so I'd decided to accept my mother-in-law's assistance.

"I was worried I might've stolen your mother's job," my mother-in-law said.

"She's said before that preparing for my sister's wedding was utterly exhausting, so you're doing her a big favor," I reassured her.

"Is that so? That's good, then."

My mother-in-law treated me with love and care even though we weren't related by blood. I couldn't thank her enough.

"That aside, are you sure you want to have the wedding ceremony in Triste?"

she asked.

“Yes. No other choices exist in my mind.”

Gabriel had suggested getting married in the capital, since it was my birthplace and I’d grown up there. The city had several luxurious venues to choose from, and we’d be able to request the latest in glamorous wedding productions. However, my heart was already in Triste. I could proudly say that holding my wedding ceremony here, with the blessing of the locals I held dear, would be the greatest happiness I could ask for.

My mother-in-law seemed to be concerned about what my mother and sister in the Empire thought of our family’s deepening ties with the slime duke family. She would ask about it at every turn.

“They’re both grateful to you,” I said. “I am too, of course.”

At that, she finally seemed relieved. “Still, I was very surprised to hear that your sister was chosen to marry the Empire’s crown prince.”

“Yes...I didn’t know what was going to happen when Prince Mael broke off their engagement, but it all worked out for her.”

My mother-in-law’s expression suddenly became strained. “I’m sorry, Miss Francette. I heard about the incident from Gabriel, but...”

The “incident” was probably the situation surrounding my sister’s canceled engagement. To be honest, I’d never discussed my family with my mother-in-law until today. Perhaps we both thought it was a topic that was best avoided.

“I should’ve discussed it with you sooner,” she continued.

“No, it’s my fault for not sharing it with you,” I replied. “How much did Gabriel tell you?”

“After you got settled in here, he told me about your family, but only what the everyman would know. I don’t have a deep understanding of the situation,” she revealed.

“Didn’t you want to know more? I mean, weren’t you concerned about whether the person he wanted to marry had a suitable family background?”

“Not at all. Gabriel never shows interest in anyone, so the fact that he

became unusually talkative when it came to you was more than enough to tell me that you were a wonderful young lady. He loves you so much, he even bowed his head and asked me to let him marry you. There's no way I would've opposed simply because of your background. On the contrary, I was determined to look after you as if you were my very own daughter."

My mother-in-law smiled warmly and gently took my hand in hers.

"When I met you in person, I thought you were a lovely lady, just like Gabriel said," she continued. "No matter who you are or where you come from, I will treasure you as if you were my own child."

Her words made tears well up in my eyes.

"O-Oh dear! What's wrong? Did I say something to upset you?"

"No, I'm just so happy!"

My mother-in-law softly hugged me. Her kindness made me cry even more. The day my sister's engagement was rescinded and my family fell into ruin, I'd lost everything, and everyone had treated me like a nobody. Since then, I'd harbored a fear of being hated like that again.

"Mother, may I tell you about what happened that day?" I asked.

"Isn't it a painful memory?"

"Even so, I want you to hear it."

My mother and sister would be attending the wedding, so it would be better for my mother-in-law to know what had happened. After regaining my composure, I told my story, beginning with Prince Mael breaking off his engagement with my sister. I explained how I had come to live in a one-story house in the old part of town, how I had made countless mistakes because I hadn't been accustomed to doing housework, how my father had eloped with the wife of a wealthy merchant, and how Gabriel had saved me from a group of thugs.

"That's the full story," I concluded.

My mother-in-law burst into tears. "H-How awful. I can't believe that happened to you! If I were at that soiree, I would have gone right up to you and

given you a hug!”

“Mother...” I imagined her defending me on that fateful day, and the thought filled me with warmth. I felt as if my past miserable self had been saved.

“Still, I’m disappointed in Gabriel. He was there, but he didn’t help you!”

“He wasn’t feeling well at the time.”

“He should’ve saved you even if he was coughing up blood!”

Even though my mother-in-law said that, I knew that if Gabriel had rescued me that day and we had gotten engaged, the current me wouldn’t exist. I would’ve become spoiled and dependent on him.

“Mother, I like the person I’ve become after overcoming hardships,” I said. “So I’m glad he didn’t save me that day.” Besides, in the end, he *had* saved me two years later.

“I can only think that he reached out to you far too late.”

“No, that’s not true.” Living in the old part of town had been extremely challenging for me. I’d had to work hard in order to get results, and many of my problems had only been solved by time and effort. “My father’s elopement was the only thing I couldn’t have possibly done anything about.”

Thanks to Gabriel, I could now stand by my fiancé’s side with confidence. Words couldn’t express how proud and happy I was.

“I’m truly grateful to you and Gabriel for giving me this fulfilling life,” I said.

“I’m happy too, thanks to you, Miss Francette.”

As we smiled warmly at each other, my mother-in-law voiced a concern she had.

“That said, I’m surprised your sister’s broken engagement wasn’t considered a serious controversy.”

“A controversy?”

“Your mother was formerly an imperial princess, wasn’t she? Prince Mael shouldn’t have gotten away with treating her daughters so horribly.”

She had a point—Prince Mael’s utter lack of respect and courtesy during the

whole ordeal could have become an international issue with the Empire.

“Maybe my mother and sister prevented it from escalating,” I said.

“Given the lack of protest from the Empire, that must be the case.”

In certain circumstances, this same scenario would have resulted in war. I shuddered at the mere thought of the future we’d avoided. A royal marriage wasn’t something that could be affected by emotions—it was a duty that had to be fulfilled no matter what. But Prince Mael had lost his senses in a bout of passion and canceled his engagement. Perhaps he hadn’t understood how grave a sin it was because he had been so caught up in love. As a result of his actions, he had been removed from his position as crown prince, and now he served as a knight guarding the country’s border.

“Apparently the king didn’t know about the rescinded engagement,” I added. He must’ve disinherited Prince Mael the moment he found out, to avoid a dispute with the Empire.

Prince Axel, the king’s second son, was now first in line to the throne. However, rather than being named the crown prince, he was called the heir apparent. I didn’t know how it was in other countries, but in ours, “crown prince” was a special title reserved for the king’s firstborn son. It was unbelievable that someone in that position would act based on emotions alone, with no regard for his country’s future or international relations.

“All I can say is that I’m appalled,” my mother-in-law said.

“Indeed...”

As the crown prince, Prince Mael had surely been expected to behave a certain way, and part of him had probably found it suffocating. My sister was also a strict puritan. I’d heard that the woman Prince Mael loved was the type to behave however she wished, not bound by conventions or common sense. Perhaps he had been attracted to her because she was the complete opposite of my sister.

In regard to my sister, I had planned on attending her wedding, but due to a sudden storm in Triste that day, I hadn’t been able to. I felt bad, but I also realized that part of me was relieved. In the past, my mother and sister had

sent me countless letters trying to convince me to move to the Empire, but I hadn't replied because I hadn't had the money to buy stamps. That had made the prospect of a reunion somewhat awkward for me. If they'd known that I hadn't had any money, they probably would've taken me to the Empire with them by force. But they didn't know about my impoverished life in the old part of town—I'd even had them address their letters to a post office instead of my house.

Of course, that wasn't the only reason I hadn't looked forward to seeing them again. A big part of it was that I was afraid of being seen as the younger sibling of my amazing sister who went to the Empire and became crown princess. Ever since her first engagement had been rescinded, I couldn't help but be terrified of people's stares. It was that fear that had given me cold feet.

I confessed all of these feelings, which I'd kept hidden until now, to my mother-in-law. As I spoke, I felt the pent-up emotions deep in my heart begin to dissipate.

My mother-in-law hugged me gently without saying anything.

"I'm sorry, mother," I said. "I didn't mean to go on for so long."

"Please don't worry, Miss Francette. I'm glad I was able to learn about everything you went through. I know you experienced many hardships before coming here, but we truly love you just the way you are. Please remember that."

"I will... Thank you." I felt so fortunate to have my kindhearted mother-in-law by my side.



My mother-in-law advised me to first think of a wedding theme with Gabriel. I wasn't familiar with the concept, but apparently, it was customary in Triste to theme wedding ceremonies around something in particular. My mother-in-law's theme had been roses, and she had prepared a rose dress and enough roses to fill the entire venue. I also asked the married employees at the Lakeside Duck Bakery about their weddings, and though they had varied in scale, every one of them had had a special theme, be it chocolate, violets, fire, or water.

Gabriel said that we should just make it whatever I liked most. But the first thing that came to mind was, well, Gabriel. When I told him that, he flushed bright red and exclaimed, “Well, you’re also what I like most!” The discussion that day accomplished nothing other than making us both embarrassed.

We thought it over for a few days, but no good ideas came to mind. At this rate, we wouldn’t get anywhere. We decided to look outwards for inspiration.

Gabriel and I got on a horse together and rode into the forest, where the autumn foliage shimmered in the bright sunlight.

“Even though I’ve been looking forward to our wedding, I can’t quite think of any specific theme,” he remarked.

“Maybe the hard part is narrowing it down to one thing.”

“What about making Wibble the theme?” suggested the slime, who had transformed into reins.

“You as the theme?” Gabriel asked. “I suppose we could decorate the venue with light-red items and—”

“Can Wibble be Fra’s dress?”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why?”



I found myself thinking, if we couldn't come up with any other themes, we should go with Wibble. It was the one who had brought us together, after all.

"I'm fine with Wibble," I said.

"Fran, marriage is a once-in-a-lifetime event. We should think it over carefully."

"Gabriel, if you get divorced, you can marry as many times as you want!"

"Wibble! How could you say that?!"

"It's true!"

"There are many things that must never be said out loud, even if they're true."

"Is this one of those 'taboo' things?"

"No, it's not that extreme."

"Hmm, sounds complicated," Wibble said nonchalantly, not seeming to care.

Gabriel, on the other hand, seemed *very* concerned. "Goodness! Where do you learn those words?"

"It's a secret!"

"It would be, wouldn't it?!"

Their conversations were always so amusing. I couldn't help but giggle.

"Fran laughed at me because of you," Gabriel said accusingly.

"It's because you're funny!"

"No, it's because you say strange things."

I hoped they would leave their banter at that—I was laughing so hard, I shed tears.

There was a poultry farm on the way to our destination.

"Fran, do you mind if we stop by?" Gabriel asked.

"Not at all."

The farm raised ducks for their meat and eggs. It was also staffed by fowl knights who took care of the ducks and guarded them from slimes and other dangers. The concept of knights protecting ducks seemed unusual to the rest of the world, so there were many tourists who wanted to see them. As a result, the fowl knights had recently set up a guided tour where they explained the ecology of ducks and how they were raised.

As usual, the fowl knights were busily running around from place to place. One of them noticed our presence and said, "Oh, Lord Gabriel and Lady Francette. Greetings."

"I'm sorry to bother you when you're busy," said Gabriel.

"Don't be! You're always welcome here!" The knight explained that there were three tours scheduled for the day, so they had their hands full getting ready for them. "We're planning out ways to make it more enjoyable for the tourists. We'll let you know when our proposal is presentable."

"I look forward to it."

The man bowed and ran off to continue his work.

"I'm glad this facility is well received by the tourists," said Gabriel.

"Indeed. I'll have to bring the knights some sweets."

The fowl knights were also looking after my duck, Alexandrine. I'd have to find time to think of a thank-you gift.

Next, we rode to Chagrin, Triste's only village. Up until recently, it had been on the decline, with many vacant houses. But now, it was full of life, with crowds everywhere. The number of sightseers from the capital was increasing, and as usual, there was a line outside the Lakeside Duck Bakery's store today.

Some children coming down the street spotted Gabriel and ran up to him with beaming smiles.

"It's Lord Gabriel!"

"Lady Francette is here too!"

We were surrounded in the blink of an eye. In the past, the children had kept

their distance, but now, they were very friendly with us. Their eyes sparkled as they updated Gabriel and me on the latest happenings in the village.

“I showed a visitor how to get somewhere and she said I was a good boy!”

“Me too!”

“My mom said all of the new customers are keeping her busy, but she’s happy.”

The increase in tourism had had a major impact on the lives of the local residents. I’d been afraid that our revitalization efforts were putting a strain on them, but much to my relief, it didn’t seem to be a problem.

“My big brother came back from the capital since there’s work for him here now.”

“My dad came back home! I’m so happy!”

From the sound of it, more and more people who had gone to work in the capital were returning. I sneaked a peek at Gabriel’s face and saw him listening to the children’s stories with a tearful expression.

They kept speaking to us one after the other, until the proprietress of a bakery passed by and yelled, “Are you kids crowding His Grace and Lady Francette again?!”

“Eek!” the children squealed in between giggles, scattering in all directions. Wibble ran ahead of them, as if leading the way. “It’s Wibble!” they exclaimed, cheerfully chasing after the slime.

Wibble was very popular with the village children and played with them every time we visited Chagrin. It had originally been my suggestion—I had asked, “Wibble, why don’t you play with the children?” And now, they were the best of friends.

Thanks to Wibble, the residents had become less afraid of tamed slimes, to the point where it was hard to believe that they used to fear Gabriel for bringing Wibble around with him. Their impression of him must have changed greatly, especially since he now visited the village more often.

The bakery proprietress gave the children an exasperated look before bowing

apologetically to us. “I’m sorry the kids keep bothering you.”

“I don’t mind,” said Gabriel. “I enjoy listening to their stories very much.”

I nodded firmly in agreement. Through them, we were able to learn about the residents’ thoughts and feelings. To be honest, I was grateful for the children, because the villagers were always reluctant to share what was truly going on in their minds.

“Everyone might be busy today because we’re welcoming a tour group for the first time, but do relax and enjoy yourselves,” the proprietress said.

“Thank you.”

She seemed to be heading back from a delivery, so she left quickly.

“I didn’t realize the group tours started today,” I remarked.

“They do,” said Gabriel.

Up until now, tourists had only come to Triste as individuals. However, a travel agency in the capital had expressed interest in organizing group tours, which were apparently beginning today.

“Look, Gabriel!” I exclaimed. “There’s a line outside the slime-product store!”

“Oh, you’re right.”

The store had opened the other day, and it sold products Gabriel had developed out of a variety of slimes. It was packed with things like water-repellent clothes, waterproof gloves, dustproof boots, and umbrellas, all carefully crafted by artisans in a workshop.

When the project first started, even the locals had been skeptical of whether the products would sell. However, after word got out in the capital that Prince Axel was wearing slime-enhanced clothing, we had received inquiries from all over the country. A reporter had interviewed Gabriel about it, and as soon as the article was published, we had been swarmed with requests from people who wished to buy them. That had gotten the store plans rolling, and at last, it’d had its grand opening the other day. I’d heard that the popular items had already sold out, with advance orders fully reserved for the next half year. The artisans were busily processing slimes every day.

“In the past, we disposed of most defeated slimes by burning them, and the fuel costs were a headache,” said Gabriel. “It’s hard to believe that we’re commodifying all of the slimes now.”

“It’s all thanks to your amazing talent.”

“No, that’s not true. Slime products were considered disgusting for many years. We had to force people to use them for the sake of improving their living conditions.”

Before, the locals had only been using slime-coated waterproof bricks and water-repellent clothes. But now, they weren’t averse to using all sorts of slime-enhanced products.

“Right, it’s because of Prince Axel’s influence too,” I said.

“That may be one of the reasons. But, Fran, it was you who gave me confidence in my slime products,” Gabriel declared with a serious look in his eyes, squeezing my hand.

“M-Me?!”

“Yes. Since you were impressed by them, I felt comfortable explaining the slime lenses to Prince Axel.”

Come to think of it, during Prince Axel’s sudden visit to Triste, my mother-in-law had shoved Gabriel, breaking his glasses. Because of that, he had switched to his spare monocle, and Prince Axel had been the first to point out the change. Gabriel had explained the special nature of his usual glasses with ease, and that was when Prince Axel had learned about slime-enhanced products for the first time. After that, Gabriel had shared various research results with him. Later on, Prince Axel had requested to do business with Gabriel, and Gabriel had provided him with his prototype products free of charge.

“If you hadn’t praised my research, I would’ve been too embarrassed to tell him about it,” Gabriel continued.

“I see. I’m glad it all worked out.”

Gabriel had spent many years on his work, only for it to go unrecognized. I’d always thought that it was a shame. Now that there was a long line of people

waiting to buy his inventions, I couldn't help but feel happy. In fact, it was so emotional, tears welled up in my eyes.

"Fran, are you crying?"

"I'm just so moved that everyone wants your products."

"I feel the same way."

Gabriel hugged me gently and wiped away my tears. Needless to say, his kindness made me cry even more.

After I regained my composure, we continued looking around the village. As all of Chagrin's previously vacant houses were occupied, new buildings were now being constructed. The latest one had been dedicated to a storefront for high-end porcelain made from Triste's kaolin. The Lakeside Duck Bakery's bonbonnières had become famous all around the country. Many people wanted to buy them, and we had finally opened a store for them.

The store's employees were mainly family members of the porcelain craftsmen. They all served the customers with cheerful expressions on their faces. Meanwhile, the kaolin slime that Gabriel had formed a contract with was still helping at the workshop and getting along with the craftsmen.

Triste's porcelain was now renowned for its high quality, and even the royal family had expressed their desire to use it for their banquets. Naturally, we had fulfilled their request. As a result, the store's signboard boasted a royal warrant in shiny letters.

As a general rule, most of the products made in Triste were for local use and consumption. At one point, we had considered selling them in the royal capital, but after discussing it, Gabriel and I had decided to limit sales to Triste to avoid antagonizing competing stores. This led to many people coming to Triste in search of goods that weren't sold anywhere else—a very different situation from not so long ago, when Chagrin had had a noticeable number of vacant houses due to many residents migrating to work in the capital.

As I gazed at the village houses, an idea came to me. "I know! Gabriel, why don't we make the villagers our wedding theme?"

“The villagers?”

“Yes. We can invite them to show our gratitude!”

“I see. So it would be like a party for everyone to enjoy?”

“That’s right.”

“I think it’s a wonderful theme for us.”

It felt as if all of the uncertainty surrounding the direction of our wedding had cleared up in an instant.

“Fran, do you have any specific ideas on what we could do?” Gabriel asked.

“Let’s see... We can serve delicious food and have a treasure hunt for the children. I think a duck race would be fun too.”

“I like that. I’ll go right ahead and inform the mayor of our plans.”

I would’ve liked to go with him, but something else required my attendance. “I have to go to welcome Mrs. Molière. Could you give the mayor my regards?”

“I will.”

Julietta de Molière was Gabriel’s kindhearted aunt who had helped me buy everything I needed for my marriage back when I had still been in the capital.

Gabriel offered to teleport me so that I could return home without him. “I’ll see you later, Fran.”

“Yes.”

Just as he was about to cast the spell, I heard a voice from afar.

“Fraaa! Wibble will go with youuu!”

The slime had become all muddy from playing with the children. Gabriel washed it with a water spell, and after shaking the droplets off, it jumped into my arms.

“Fra, let’s go home!”

“Wibble, I’m your master.”

“Are you sure?”

“What did I do to deserve a slime like you?!”

“Tee hee, Wibble is blushing!”

“That wasn’t a compliment!”

Gabriel heaved a sigh before sending me and Wibble to the castle. The scenery around us changed in an instant, and we were now in my room, where the triplets—Nico, Rico, and Coco—were cleaning.

“Welcome back, Lady Francette!” said Nico.

“Thank you.”

Nico was the cheerful one of the three. Rico was the bespectacled one giving a stoic bow, and Coco was the one with the slightly reserved smile.

Rico stepped forwards and whispered in my ear, “Lady Francette, Mrs. Molière has arrived.”

“Oh my, she’s already here?!”

“Due to the increase in wyvern flights to and from the capital, it appears that she was able to come one flight early. She is currently engaged in conversation with Lord Gabriel’s mother, though, so there is no need to hurry.”

I changed from my outdoor attire to a tea dress for entertaining visitors. I also had my makeup done and my hair arranged. Once I was ready, I headed to the parlor.

“It’s been a while, Mrs. Molière,” I greeted her.

“Oh, Miss Francette! I’m glad you’re doing well.”

“I’m happy to see that you’re in good health.”

She giggled. “There’s no need for those stiff formalities. We’re family, aren’t we?” she asked, giving me a big hug. Her warmth made me feel warm and fuzzy inside too.

“Julietta, Miss Francette won’t know what to do if you hold on to her forever like that,” my mother-in-law said when she realized her sister wasn’t letting go.

“R-Right. We haven’t seen each other in a while, so I couldn’t help but feel emotional.” Mrs. Molière released me and peered into my face with a smile as

bright as a sunflower. It was mysterious how being with her always filled me with cheer.

Wibble came in after me and greeted her. *“Oh, it’s Juli!”*

“Why, if it isn’t Wibbly...I mean, Wibble!”

“Yep, that’s right!” Wibble was happy to see Mrs. Molière again too. *“Why are you here?”*

“Oh!” Mrs. Molière exclaimed, remembering the purpose of her visit. “As promised, I brought the dress! Look!”

She unveiled a mannequin with the bridal gown I had ordered when we were buying my marriage necessities. The shiny, pure-white garment was gorgeous despite not having a single embellishment.

“What do you think, Miss Francette?”

“It’s stunning.” I was captivated at first sight by the dress’s ephemeral beauty—I almost doubted whether it was real. It moved me to tears. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Molière.”

She giggled. “All I did was bring it over from the capital.”

That wasn’t true at all. Back in the capital, I hadn’t wanted to further impose, so I had said that I would be fine with a ready-made wedding dress. The marriage had been decided hastily, after all. But Mrs. Molière had exclaimed, “No!” and insisted that I have it made to order. As a result, I now had my own one-of-a-kind dress. My heart was so full of happiness that it overflowed in the form of tears.

My mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière looked at me with kind expressions, knowing how I felt. This was no time to stand here and be emotional, though—the dress still needed an important modification. In our country, tradition dictated that a bridal gown must be embellished with the cooperation of one’s family. Normally, it was embroidered or decorated according to the theme of the wedding.

“Miss Francette, have you decided on a wedding theme?” Mrs. Molière asked.

“Yes! We did just a little while ago.”

“Ooh, what is it?”

“Ah, you finally decided,” my mother-in-law said.

“Yes.” I announced it to them. “The theme of our wedding is the people of Triste. Gabriel and I want to invite everyone who has been supporting this land, so that they can have a good time too.”

“Oh my, what a lovely idea!” my mother-in-law exclaimed.

“Yes, it’s perfect for the slime duke family!” Mrs. Molière added.

I was relieved that they were receptive to the idea. To be honest, I had secretly been nervous about it.

Mrs. Molière and I held hands and rejoiced.

“We don’t have time to celebrate,” my mother-in-law admonished us. “We have to think about the wedding favors and the dress decorations.”

“Oh, right,” said Mrs. Molière.

While I did feel that Triste’s staple bonbonnières would make good wedding favors, perhaps there were other options to consider. I’d have to think it over again.

“Miss Francette, do you have any ideas for the dress?” my mother-in-law asked.

“Um, well...I was thinking it would be nice to express a connection with the people of Triste, or something like that.” It was only a rough concept; I didn’t have any exact decorations in mind.

Just as I was about to ask them for suggestions, Mrs. Molière clapped her hands and said, “If it’s to represent connections, what about decorative pearls? We could buy some and thread them together.”

“Each pearl would represent an individual person, right?”

“Exactly! What do you think?”

“It’s a wonderful idea!”

“I like it too,” my mother-in-law agreed.

“Great,” said Mrs. Molière.

“I’m impressed, Julietta.”

“Oh? Did you forget, my dear sister? We’ve talked about making pearl dresses before.”

“We...have! You’re right!”

Apparently, when they were children, they had wanted to make matching pearl dresses for their weddings. But in the end, they had become estranged when Mrs. Molière left their homeland.

“I got engaged first, so we never got to make a single pearl dress,” Mrs. Molière lamented. “I still regret it to this day.”

“Yes,” said my mother-in-law. “I was looking forward to it so much. I can’t believe I forgot about it until now.”

“When I moved out, I brought the design we drew together with me.”

“You did?”

“Yes, I was desperate to not let it get thrown out. But when it came time to prepare for the wedding, I was so busy that I forgot all about it.”

My mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière still remembered what the design looked like, so they cheerfully recreated it on a piece of paper.

“It goes with a pearl shoulder necklace, like this,” said Mrs. Molière.

“Weren’t there pearls on the tiara too?” my mother-in-law asked.

“Yes, and they were also scattered on the veil, like a starry sky.”

“Oh, that’s right.”

The illustration was completed in no time at all. The design was unbelievably beautiful.

“Miss Francette, do you have any preferences?” Mrs. Molière asked.

“Feel free to ask for anything,” my mother-in-law added.

“No, I want to wear this dress for my wedding,” I replied.

The sisters smiled, relieved. Now that we had a solid idea to work with, it was

time to discuss what kind of pearls to use.

“Perhaps the aurora pearls from the ogre territory,” my mother-in-law suggested. “Everyone knows of them.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” said Mrs. Molière. “They’re world-famous.”

Come to think of it, the ogre duke, Emilie, had been wearing a pearl hair ornament when I met her previously, and her dress had been decorated with pearls as well. I recalled that they had shone brilliantly, iridescent with rich colors reminiscent of peacock feathers. Those must’ve been aurora pearls.

“Those would be nice,” I said.

“Unfortunately, rumor has it that they’re harder to obtain than they used to be,” said my mother-in-law.

“I’ve heard the same,” said Mrs. Molière.

Apparently, these pearls in particular were not naturally occurring but had been cultivated with a special technique. Even so, they were lauded for being more beautiful than natural pearls and fetched a high price on the market. However, there hadn’t been many in circulation in recent years.

“I’ve been in correspondence with the ogre duke, Lady Emilie,” I said. “I’ll try asking her if she would be willing to sell us some aurora pearls. I’m concerned about the cost, though. If they’ve become rarer, they must be quite expensive now.”

“You don’t have to worry about the price, Miss Francette,” said my mother-in-law.

“This is for your special day, after all,” said Mrs. Molière. “If it’s over your budget, I’ll ask my husband to help out.”

“Thank you both so much,” I said.

And so, I decided to send a letter to Emilie right away.

That night, I told Gabriel that I’d decided on how to decorate my dress.

“A pearl-themed dress representing our connection to the people... What a

wonderful idea,” he said.

“Yes, it’s going to be the greatest dress in the world thanks to mother and Mrs. Molière. The only issue is the aurora pearls. There haven’t been many in circulation lately, so we don’t know if we’ll be able to buy them.”

“The aurora pearls from the ogre duke’s domain?” Gabriel queried. “I do recall that issue being raised at a monster duke meeting a few years ago, before Lady Emilie became ogre duke. The number entering the market had suddenly decreased, and the other dukes were discussing what could have happened. But with no ogre duke at the time, an explanation was impossible. Since the seat was only filled this year, everyone had completely forgotten about it by the time we last held our meeting. In other words, practically no one knows what happened to the aurora pearls. It seems they still aren’t in circulation, so we might not be able to obtain any.”

“I’ll prepare for that outcome.” Even if we couldn’t get aurora pearls, we could just use other ones. It wasn’t a major problem.

The topic shifted to Gabriel’s discussion with the mayor of Chagrin.

“I told him about our wedding theme, and he suggested holding a festival of sorts on that day, with stalls and whatnot,” he explained.

“Oh, that’s a lovely idea. It’s so nice of him to plan a fun event to celebrate with us.” Everyone, even the children, would be able to enjoy such a festival. It was looking like our wedding day would be very lively. “I’m really excited for the ceremony.”

“Me too.”

A natural break in conversation fell between us. I smiled at Gabriel, and he hugged me. We used to have a rule where we embraced like this once a day. Some days, he’d been too embarrassed to do it, but now, it came naturally to him. Though there had been a few awkward exchanges early on in our engagement, these moments of intimacy were now filled with joy—and the thought of finally being able to have our wedding made me even happier.

“Gabriel, let’s make this an unforgettable wedding ceremony,” I said.

“That was always my intention.”

With determination in our hearts, we continued spending a fulfilling time together.



On the second day of Mrs. Molière's visit, she decided to show me the slime duke family's chestnut trees, since they were in season.

"This way, Miss Francette!"

"C-Coming!"

This part of the yard was so vast and nature rich that it might as well have been a forest. Mrs. Molière was making her way through with ease, but I was lagging behind.

"*Fra, are you okay?*" Wibble asked, peering into my face with concern.

"Yes, I can keep going."

About ten more minutes of walking later, we arrived at our destination. My eyes were greeted by the sight of many chestnut trees, their spiny burrs scattered on the ground.

"This is the place!" Mrs. Molière announced. "With chestnuts, you don't pick them from the trees. You gather the ones that have fallen to the grou— Ah!"

"What's the matter?"

"It just came back to me. Gardeners used to remove the burrs for us by stomping on them."

"I'll give it a try, then."

"It's too dangerous. What if they stab through your shoe?"

As we pondered what to do, Wibble raised a tentacle and said, "*Wibble can do it!*" It swallowed up a nearby burr, bounced on the spot a few times, then spat out the spiky shell followed by the chestnuts that had been within.

"You're incredible, Wibble!" Mrs. Molière exclaimed.

"*Heh heh!*" The slime basked in the praise.

"There's plenty more over there!"

“Leave it to Wibble!”

In no time at all, we had a basket full of chestnuts.

“Mrs. Molière, what did your family make with these chestnuts?” I asked, knowing that Triste had its own traditional sweets.

Her response surprised me. “We roasted them over an open fire! They’re delicious when they’re piping hot. I’d like to recreate that flavor today.”

“Let’s ask the gardeners to help, then.”

“Yes!”

The bonfire was prepared under Mrs. Molière’s direction. Apparently firewood couldn’t be used as fuel—it had to be fire magicite to ensure that the chestnuts wouldn’t burn. Once the fire was ready, the next step was roasting them, but...

“Now then, let’s put the chestnuts in the flame.”

“M-Mrs. Molière!” one of the gardeners interjected. “If you roast them as they are, the chestnuts will explode.”

“Oh, is that so?”

The rest of the gardeners nodded and said we had to use a knife to cut slits in the chestnuts first, which they helped us with. The key was to score all the way through the shell, reaching the inner skin. Mrs. Molière didn’t cook—and thus was unaccustomed to handling a knife—so she merely watched us work.

After we prepared the chestnuts, *then* it was time to begin roasting. We placed them in the magicite-powered fire and waited thirty minutes. With that, the roasted chestnuts were ready to eat. One of the gardeners split the shells open with gloved hands.

I sampled one of the beautiful yellow pieces. “Oh, it’s sweet!”

Mrs. Molière giggled. “Isn’t it?”

The chestnuts were tender and surprisingly sweet. The thorough roasting must’ve enhanced their flavor.

“I missed this so much!” Mrs. Molière exclaimed, moved by the nostalgic

treat. "My dream's come true thanks to you, Miss Francette."

"I didn't do anything special, though."

"You got me to talk about the chestnut trees in the yard, didn't you? I'd forgotten about them for so long. This couldn't have happened without you."

"I'm, um, honored to hear that."

As we were eating the roasted chestnuts, my mother-in-law, who had been taking a walk in the garden, approached us.

"What are you two doing over there?" she asked.

"We were roasting chestnuts, Maria. It's been so long, hasn't it?"

"Oh my!"

As Mrs. Molière began to offer my mother-in-law one, her hand froze midway. "Come to think of it, you always said you didn't want any."

"That was because I simply wasn't allowed to have them since my attendant would scold me if I got soot all over my dress."

"I see. My nanny forbade me from eating them too, but she wouldn't give me a reason, so I secretly requested the gardener make them for me."

My mother-in-law sighed at her sister's rebellious past. "I envy how easy you had it."

"I sympathize, truly. You were the eldest child, so you had to endure a lot."

"Yes, but I no longer need to." My mother-in-law gave a faint smile and held out her hand. "Julietta, may I have a roasted chestnut?"

"Of course!" Mrs. Molière happily handed one over.

A look of surprise came over my mother-in-law's face as she ate the forbidden treat for the first time. "It's just a roasted chestnut, but it's so delicious!"

"Yes, indeed."

"It's no wonder you defied your nanny's orders just to eat some."

With a warm smile, I listened to my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière reminisce about their childhood.



A few days later, I received a reply to the letter I'd sent Emilie. Constance, the family steward, brought it to me on a silver tray.

"Lady Francette, a letter from the ogre duke."

"Thank you."

She had even prepared a paper knife, stationery, and a reply envelope, which she handed over to me before bowing respectfully and leaving the room.

I opened Emilie's letter, and the contents turned out to be greatly disappointing. As Gabriel had said, sales of aurora pearls were currently suspended. The reason was that the lake where they were cultivated had become polluted, preventing their production. There had been efforts to purify the lake over the past few years, but none had been successful, putting the business in a tough spot.

Emilie's uncle had been in charge of aurora pearl production, and even he didn't know what was causing the issue. He also wanted to keep this fact behind closed doors because it would bring shame to the family. Emilie, however, held the opposite opinion. As the new ogre duke, she wanted to publicize the issue and seek new solutions from external parties.

At any rate, things weren't going well for them at the moment, so it was impossible to obtain aurora pearls. My shoulders slumped.

I shared this information with Gabriel and my mother-in-law, both of whom were also disappointed. *Well, there are plenty of pearls in the world. Even without the aurora pearls, we can still make a wonderful wedding outfit—or so I thought, but...*

Later, a jeweler came from the capital to show us various types of pearls. The ones he showed us had been carefully selected, and he was proud of them. However, none could compare to the aurora pearls I remembered seeing. My mother-in-law wasn't particularly impressed either.

We summoned several other jewelers to show us their wares, but none of the pearls felt right. My inner desire for a wedding dress adorned with aurora pearls

became stronger by the day.

After buying an unrelated piece of jewelry from the latest merchant and sending him on his way, I confided, “Mother, I think imagining the dress with aurora pearls made it so that I can’t be satisfied with anything else.”

“Funny you should say that, Miss Francette—I was thinking the same thing.”

But the aurora pearls were unattainable. I knew I’d have to compromise, but I just couldn’t bring myself to. I heaved a sigh, not knowing what to do.

Just then, a letter from Emilie arrived. She wished to visit Triste, and naturally, I replied, “We’d love to have you.”

The day of her visit came in no time. Gabriel, my mother-in-law, and I got ready to greet her. She would be the third monster duke to visit this land—the first two being Prince Axel, the dragon duke, and Lady Magritte, the siren duke. Welcoming the ogre duke was nerve-racking, even if we were pen pals. I waited anxiously in the drawing room, and at last, she arrived.

“Thank you for allowing me to visit, Your Grace,” Emilie said.

“You’re always welcome here,” Gabriel replied.

Emilie looked relieved. She turned to me and said, “It’s been a while, Lady Francette! I was really hoping to see you again!”

She gave me quite the powerful hug—her small frame belying her strength. As we pulled back, our bracelets clinked against each other. Both were made from slime crystals that had been strung together.

“Oh, thank you very much for this bracelet,” Emilie said. “I love it. I didn’t know you had a matching one.”

“Yes, I do,” I said, noting that she’d chosen to wear the gift even though I had explained to her that the crystals were made from processed slimes.



“Oh? Yours has an emerald hue, Lady Francette.”

“Mine is enchanted so that Gabriel will know my current location.” I explained that I had been kidnapped by his great-uncle before and that Gabriel had been so worried afterwards that he had specially made this bracelet for me. He’d given it to me for my birthday, and it was a beloved treasure of mine.

Emilie gave a faint smile and said something I never would’ve expected: “The slime duke must love you very much, Lady Francette.”

Gabriel’s and my eyes instantly met, and we blushed. As I stood there, red as a tomato, Emilie turned to my mother-in-law and curtsied.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, madam. I am the ogre duke, Emilie.”

“The pleasure is mine. I’m Gabriel’s mother, Maria de Slime.”

Emilie explained that she had come here via a connecting wyvern flight. “I was so surprised. Triste used to be a multiday journey from the capital, but by wyvern, you can get here in a few hours.”

“Yes, isn’t it wonderful?” my mother-in-law replied. “It’s all thanks to our dear Miss Francette’s negotiations with Prince Axel.”

“You’re amazing, Lady Francette!” Emilie gazed at me with clear, sparkling eyes. I couldn’t help but gasp at her radiance.

My mother-in-law spoke as if I had done all of the work, but it had actually been Gabriel’s idea, and he had been the one to arrange the meeting with Prince Axel. All I had done was discuss it with the prince. I didn’t want to take full credit.

“Not only do you run the Lakeside Duck Bakery well, you even have negotiation skills!” Emilie exclaimed. “You really are incredible!”

“Yes, Miss Francette is the slime duke family’s pride and joy,” my mother-in-law added.

I cleared my throat and tried to steer the conversation in a different direction, but every topic resulted in my mother-in-law bragging about me. Unable to bear the embarrassment, I ended up hiding my face behind my hands.

“Please relax and enjoy your stay,” my mother-in-law said to Emilie before leaving.

Gabriel and I showed Emilie to the guest room, where we had Triste’s specialty tea served with a seasonal lingonberry tart. Emilie praised them both.

After she was settled in, Gabriel asked, “So, what brings you here, Your Grace?”

Emilie clapped her hands. “Oh, right! I wanted to apologize again. You were hoping to buy our aurora pearls, but we weren’t able to provide them.”

She explained that she had been rushing around until the very last minute, looking for a way to restore production. She’d hired a magician to investigate, read a large number of ancient tomes, and tried everything she could think of, only to conclude that it was hopeless.

“I’m really sorry we can’t provide the pearls for your wedding,” she said. “I’m so ashamed.” She bowed deeply and fell silent.

I decided to ask something that had been on my mind for a long time. “Um, Lady Emilie, why exactly are you no longer able to harvest aurora pearls?”

“That’s...” The girl’s bright disposition instantly clouded over. She lowered her gaze and pursed her lips.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked that.”

“No, it’s fine. It’s a long story, but would you like to hear it?”

I nodded.

“This is the ogre duke family’s secret—it’s never graced an outsider’s ear. The ogre duke’s territory is a remote area deep in the mountains. Because of that, it’s rich in natural resources, and the environment was originally suitable for cultivating aurora pearls. But my uncle became blinded by greed and started a tourism business aimed at the wealthy.”

Apparently magicite was used to cultivate the aurora pearls in a short period of time, and after they were harvested, the oysters were disposed of. During the time it took for new oysters to grow, revenue would fall, so Emilie’s uncle had come up with the idea of inviting tourists to make up for their losses during

the offseason.

“He lied to the wealthy and said it was an exclusive special region that even the nobility had no knowledge of,” Emilie explained. “He charged them large sums of money to visit, which in itself wasn’t a bad thing, but the invited guests went on drunken sprees, dumping garbage into the aurora pearl lake, polluting the water, and behaving however they liked. My uncle hid their misdeeds so well that I didn’t notice until it was too late. By the time I realized that something was wrong, the lake was already so dirty that it couldn’t be purified, and the oysters needed for cultivating aurora pearls had all died. None of the attempted solutions worked—the beautiful aurora pearls couldn’t be produced again. I didn’t want to lose them, but there was nothing I could do.”

She bit her lip, frustrated.

“Some of my family members even tried to persuade me to give up. I know it might be selfish of me to insist on recovering the aurora pearls, but...”

I was at a loss for words.

Gabriel broke the silence, seeming to remember something. “Were the pearls you wore to the last party aurora pearls?”

“Yes, they were special aurora pearls that have been handed down in my family for generations.”

“I remember how beautiful they were,” I said.

“Thank you. It makes me happy to hear that.”

During our visit to the capital for the monster duke meeting, I had met Emilie at a soiree held by the king. I could still vividly recall the radiance of the aurora pearls that had adorned her outfit.

“It’s so saddening that the aurora pearls will be lost forever,” I said.

“Thank you for your sympathy, Miss Francette.”

Seeing the girl so glum, I wished I could do something to help. *I’m powerless in this situation...but what about Gabriel?* I looked to him, and he met my gaze. He nodded as if he understood what I was thinking.

“Um, Gabriel, would you be able to help Lady Emilie?” I asked.

“I won’t know without more information, but I can at least help brainstorm a solution,” he said.

Emilie looked up immediately, her previously downcast eyes now glimmering with hope. “Are you sure about this?!”

“Yes. For now, I’d like to exchange documents and discuss at a later date.”

“Gladly!”

And so, we decided to devise a way to restore the aurora pearls. After Emilie left, I expressed my gratitude to Gabriel.

“Thank you for helping with the aurora pearls.”

“I can only hope that I’ll be able to do anything.”

“You definitely will. Wait, am I putting pressure on you by saying that?”

“No, I’m happy about this outcome. Earlier, I was debating whether to help the ogre duke or not. I didn’t know if it was right to meddle in another territory’s affairs. But since you gave me a gentle nudge, the conversation moved in a positive direction.”

“That’s good, then.” I was relieved to know that I hadn’t forced him to grant my wish.



Around a week later, Emilie visited Triste again. Gabriel, my mother-in-law, and I went to welcome her together.

“First, please look at this,” Emilie said, placing a thick tome on the table and pushing it towards us. “This book details how the aurora pearls are cultivated.”

Gabriel opened it, revealing the words “Confidential—Internal Use Only” in bright-red letters. He immediately asked, “Aren’t we forbidden from reading this?”

“It’s fine. If my family had their way, their obstinacy in protecting our secrets would result in us losing the aurora pearls forever. So, could you please analyze this book and restore our prized pearls?”

Gabriel replied calmly, “First of all, it would be difficult for me to go to the

ogre duke's territory and investigate the cause of the problem. In addition to my regular duties, I need to prepare for my wedding coming up in spring, and the corresponding village events must go through me for approval. I will not be able to leave Triste."

"I'm sorry for making an unreasonable request when you're so busy," said Emilie.

"There's no need to apologize. I'm sure I'll be able to think of a strategy for you in my spare time. The environmental deterioration is most likely the issue. Triste has a similarly poor environment due to the slimes, so if we can succeed in cultivating aurora pearls here, it should be possible to resume production in your territory as well. If that is acceptable to you, please let me help with the restoration."

Emilie's face lit up. She seemed ready to agree right away, but Gabriel interrupted her.

"However, if I am to research pearl cultivation here in Triste, it raises a number of issues."

The most important one is probably remuneration, I mused.

"Your Grace, have you considered what the compensation will be in the event that we do restore the aurora pearls?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes, of course," said Emilie. "If you can purify the lake and produce beautiful aurora pearls, I would like you to share the methods you used with the ogre duke family. I also ask that you stagger your production season with ours."

She showed Gabriel a contract that spanned multiple pages. She had already thought out the details, evidently.

"How long does it take to produce the pearls?" I asked.

"In the wild, it would normally take six to twelve months," said Emilie. "But the ogre duke family's cultivation method feeds the oysters with magicite, allowing them to develop pearls in about three to seven days."

She added that she would lend Gabriel the book free of charge.

"Mother, what is your opinion?" Gabriel asked.

“My input hardly matters,” my mother-in-law said. “It’s *your* wedding, so the two of you should ponder it together.”

Hearing those words, Gabriel looked at me with a determined expression. “Fran, let’s try to make aurora pearls.”

“Are you sure about adding to your workload?”

“Of course. We’ll do our best together.”

That’s right—if we need to accomplish something, we should all work together and share both the hardships and the joys.

Gabriel held out his hand, and I took it in mine and nodded.

“Let’s work with Lady Emilie to make aurora pearls,” I declared.

“Yes!”

And so, we decided to try our hand at developing aurora pearls.

In the afternoon, I had a tea party with Emilie since it wasn’t too busy of a day. It was just the two of us, and she had brought tea and sweets from her territory. I was curious about the food culture there after hearing about it in her letters.

“This is called butter tea,” Emilie explained. “It’s popular with the locals.”

It was my first time having tea with butter in it. Apparently it was made by boiling milk and tea leaves, then adding butter, cinnamon, and a small pinch of salt.

“And these sweets are fried bread dipped in honey,” she added.

I’d never had that before either. I excitedly began with the butter tea. “It’s...rich with a strong cinnamon aroma. And slightly salty... What an unusual flavor.” The taste surprised me at first, but it grew on me as I drank it.

I bit into the fried bread, and honey oozed out. My only impression was that it was sweet.

“It’s tooth-rottingly sweet,” I remarked.

“Yes,” said Emilie. “Isn’t it ridiculous? I love your pastries because they don’t

go overboard with the sweetness. In my territory, it doesn't snow in winter, but it's bitterly cold. People eat lots of sweet foods to get by, and that's why all of our pastries are too sweet."

"I-I see."

"I'd love to live here so that I could eat more of your sweets."

"I'll be sure to send you more."

"Thank you, Miss Francette!"

After a pause in the conversation, we started talking about my wedding ceremony.

"Lady Emilie, will you accept this invitation to our wedding?" I asked. I had actually planned on giving it to her last time, but since her mind had been occupied by the aurora pearl issue, I had decided to wait for a better opportunity.

"Oh, gladly! I wouldn't miss it for the world. Let me know if you need any help."

"May I ask you to be a bridesmaid, then?"

"It would be my honor. Please let me be your bridesmaid!"

I was very grateful for her eagerness to assist me on my special day.



Since there was going to be a festival on the day of our wedding ceremony, we were flooded with applications from people wishing to run stalls, including store owners. It was my job to inspect each one and give my approval. There was limited space for stalls, so we couldn't accept all of them—my days were spent carefully selecting an equal variety to ensure the enjoyment of as many residents as possible.

Aside from that, I also had to write invitations and think of dishes to be served at the reception. There was a mountain of work to be done, not to mention my existing duties at the Lakeside Duck Bakery that couldn't be ignored, like taste testing new products, greeting visitors, and replying to inquiries.

Fortunately, I had help from our capable steward, Constance, and my loyal attendants, Nico, Rico, and Coco. They were working as hard as they could too. And then there was my duck, Alexandrine, whose presence soothed my heart. Whenever I collapsed at my desk, she would nuzzle against my cheek to cheer me up. At the same time, Wibble would call for a break and make me delicious tea. I wouldn't have been able to get things done without everyone's help—I was so grateful to them.

In the evenings, Gabriel and I would discuss aurora pearl production. We took turns reading the book that Emilie had given us, but the content was so complex that I couldn't even understand a tenth of it.

"It's not your fault, Fran," said Gabriel. "This cultivation method uses high-level magical techniques, so the book doesn't hesitate to use specialist jargon. How far have you gotten in it?"

I showed him the page I was on.

"You've already read that much?!" he exclaimed in surprise.

"I skimmed the parts I didn't understand, so I haven't been taking in everything." The book was dense with hastily scrawled notations, and I didn't know most of the terminology. I might have been progressing quickly, but it hardly mattered when I wasn't processing what I read.

"No, what surprises me is that you could read these words and sentences at all."

"The words and sentences?"

"The handwriting is clearly terrible, isn't it? And the prose is all over the place."

The writing was certainly a bit crude, and the sentences meandered and weren't well constructed. "It's not unreadable, though."

"It takes me quite a while to piece together what it's saying, so I lose focus. I end up getting a headache."

"It's that bad?"

"Yes. The writing is so poor that I have to read your letters to calm myself

down. How is it that you can read it?”

“I think...it’s probably because I was exposed to various kinds of penmanship as a child.” I had exchanged letters with a diverse group of people, some of whom had writing that looked like chicken scratch, but I had simply thought it was unique. Reading messy handwriting came easily to me.

“That’s wonderful. You could say it’s a special skill.”

“Is it really?”

“Yes. Please have confidence in yourself.”

The look in his gaze was so serious that I had to nod and accept it.

“Since childhood, I’ve never been good at reading original magic tomes,” he continued. “Most of them were written by hand, before the invention of printing, and reading them was agonizing because the majority of the mages capable of publishing their work had poor handwriting and rambling prose. But nowadays, most of the magic books in circulation are neat transcripts rewritten by scribes, so it is no longer common to come across messy text. That’s why this is so tiring.”

“It must’ve been hard for you.”

“Indeed. I can only read this aurora pearl cultivation book for an hour every night before I feel sick. If only it were written by you, I’d be able to read it for hours.”

I hadn’t known Gabriel had been struggling so much with the book. Suddenly, I had an idea. “In that case, shall I read it and transcribe the text for you?”

“Wouldn’t that be too much trouble?”

“Not at all. I didn’t understand most of what I read, but I can definitely copy as much of it as you want.”

“That would be a great help!”

It wouldn’t be good to transcribe it without permission, though, so I would have to ask Emilie first.

“For now, why don’t I read it to you?” I asked.

“That would be nice. I’m sure I’ll have wonderful dreams.”

Happy to be able to contribute something, I immediately started reading the book aloud for him.

A few days later, I received permission from Emilie to transcribe the book and began doing so in my spare time.

“Wibble will help!”

“Thank you.”

Together with my talented slime assistant, I copied the book’s contents to a separate ream of paper.

I vaguely knew that pearls came from oysters, but I didn’t know how exactly they were made. The book described the principles of pearl production in detail.

When a foreign object such as a grain of sand enters an oyster’s shell, the oyster feels pain. In order to alleviate the pain, it envelops the grain with an iridescent substance it secretes called nacre. The resulting object is called a pearl.

In other words, pearls weren’t actively produced by oysters—they were the product of a natural defense mechanism. When the first ogre duke discovered this mechanism, he had wondered if pearls could be cultivated.

The creation process required both time and effort. In order to artificially produce pearls, a core in the shape of a perfect sphere was placed inside the oyster. The oyster was then fed powdered magicite. Magic was used to strictly control the water quality and temperature too.

The pearl would be ready in a week at the earliest, but before it was harvested, a transparency spell was used to check its condition within the shell. If it was fully formed, it was taken out of the oyster.

The harvested pearls were sorted by a variety of factors, such as size, level of imperfection, and luster. Then they were shipped to jewelers and other dealers.

“Phew,” I sighed, having finished transcribing a few dozen pages about pearl

cultivation. Wibble had performed all of the miscellaneous tasks like switching out the sheets of paper, drying the ink, and refilling the inkwell, allowing me to focus solely on writing.

“Fra, did you make good progress?”

“Yes, I got a lot done thanks to you, Wibble.”

“Yay!”

I had each page delivered to Gabriel in sequence as soon as the ink dried. Partway through, I received a message card from him, saying, “Your writing is very beautiful and easy to read. Thank you.” Reading it made me so happy, I felt all of my fatigue disappear.

I’ll keep up this pace for the rest of the book, I thought with renewed motivation.

Chapter 2: The Noble Lady Francette Tries to Make Pearls!

I breathed a sigh of relief as I finished the last of the transcriptions. It had been quite the ordeal. However, Gabriel seemed to have achieved a complete understanding of pearl cultivation in mere days.

“Thanks to you, the information was easy to digest,” Gabriel said.

“That’s good.” I was happy to hear that I’d been of help.

Though we’d only been working in the evenings thus far, it was now time to get started on cultivating the pearls proper.

“First, we need to find a lake where we can raise the oysters,” Gabriel said.

“Right.” According to the book, we ideally wanted a lake that was deep and relatively large.

“It would be nice to find somewhere with good water quality and few slimes, but...”

“Does a place like that exist here?”

“No.”

Triste was essentially a slime stronghold, after all. You couldn’t walk anywhere without encountering the gelatinous beasts.

“Let’s give up on that second condition,” I said. “We’ll prioritize water quality!”

“I can think of a few places. The most promising one is Shining Lake, famed for being the most beautiful lake in Triste. In fact, my father was so captivated by its beauty that, without thinking, he proposed to my mother when he saw it. I’ll teleport us there.”

“I can’t wait to see it.”

Gabriel cast his teleport spell, and the scenery transformed in a blink. I

opened my eyes to a green lake overrun by plant life.

“Wh-What is this place?!” Gabriel exclaimed.

As if answering his question, the sign right next to us proclaimed the words “Shining Lake.”

“Did I bring us to the wrong place?” he mused.

“Um, Gabriel, the sign says, ‘Shining Lake.’”

Alerted to the presence of the sign, he held his head in his hands and fell to his knees. “I can’t believe it’s deteriorated into this state since my last visit.”

He explained that the year before last, Triste had experienced a record-breaking heat wave, which had caused the rampant growth of aquatic plants. There were an unbelievable number of them in this lake, covering the surface like a fine-meshed net.

Wibble touched a plant at the edge of the water and recoiled. *“Whoa, it’s all sticky!”*

The stickiness of the vegetation meant that once touched, it was hard to get off.

Gabriel slumped his shoulders and lamented, “It was my dream to bring you here for a picnic one day and show you its beauty!”

“It’s okay, Gabriel. I’m sure it would also be fun to have a picnic while looking at the plants on the lake.”

He looked up at me and gasped. “Oh, I understand! Nothing in this world is more beautiful than you, so as long as you’re there, we won’t need breathtaking scenery.”

That went in a completely different direction than intended, but since it cheered Gabriel up, I’ll let it slide.

Suddenly, he stood up and shouted, “Stand back! Wibble, protect Fran!”

“Okaaay!” Wibble transformed into a shield in front of me.

I looked at the lake, wondering what had happened, and saw the green mesh covering the surface rising up like a tsunami. “Wh-What is that?! A plant

monster?!”

“Nope, it’s probably slimes.”

“Slimes?!”

Gabriel summoned his five different-colored slimes to confront the monsters. First, the black slime turned into a sword and sliced through the plants, exposing a large number of slime faces now peering through the gap. I was impressed by their cleverness in hiding under the vegetation to attack. The red slime shot fireballs at the organic mass to no effect—the slimes were nonflammable thanks to their current wet and sticky coating.

Gabriel quickly commanded, “Shoot lightning at that whole thing.”

“Got it!” The yellow slime vibrated as if charging up energy, then fired a bolt of electricity that traveled through the water and electrocuted the swarm of monsters. They instantly died, stopping the mass’s advance.

“Fran, were you injured at all?” Gabriel asked.

“Thanks to you and Wibble, I’m perfectly fine. Thank you.”

The electrocuted slimes had stiffened up, resembling ice. It surprised me because slimes usually melted into liquid when they died.

“Gabriel, why did the slimes go stiff when they died?” I asked.

“You could say it’s because of their nature.”

Apparently, when slimes were hit by paralyzing attacks, they hardened up in self-defense. However, it wasn’t that effective of a technique, so if you continued to attack them, they would still die.

“As a result, they die while maintaining that stiffened form,” Gabriel explained.

“That’s so interesting.”

“Isn’t it? I considered whether they could be used for something in that form, but it isn’t as transparent, and it takes more effort to extract mana from it than from normal deceased slimes. So I haven’t come up with anything yet.”

“Are they different from the crystals in my bracelet?”

“Yes, those were made by flash freezing liquid slime. I also extracted the mana and further polished the crystals before making them into jewelry.”

“That’s more involved than I expected. You really are amazing.”

“No, it was nothing special.”

He said that, but his expression showed that he was prouder than he let on. It seemed like my constant efforts to raise his self-esteem were slowly taking effect. I really wanted him to have more confidence in himself, so I’d just have to keep praising him.

“Anyway, this lake isn’t going to work,” he concluded.

“Would it be difficult to use even if you removed all of the plants?”

“Yes. The water doesn’t look very high-quality, perhaps because the plants’ sticky substance has dissolved into it.” He ordered the yellow slime to part the mess of vegetation, which revealed that the water underneath was just as green in color. He looked towards the depths of the forest and squinted with one eye.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I just noticed that the large tree that used to be here has fallen down.” He pointed at a felled tree that had a large crack in it as if it had been struck by lightning. “I believe its branches and leaves used to overhang the lake.”

That probably further explained the issue. Without the tree to block the sun’s rays, the lake had become a hotbed for rapid vegetation growth.

“I doubt places with high exposure to sunlight would be conducive to cultivating pearls,” said Gabriel.

“We’ll have to find another lake, then.”

“Yes. There’s another one with relatively good water quality. Let’s go there now.”

He teleported us, and once again, the scenery changed in an instant. The previous forest had been bright and sunny, but this one was dense with trees, giving it a dark and gloomy atmosphere.

“It’s a bit unsettling, but the lake is surprisingly clean,” he explained. “I come by every once in a while because you can find many unusual medicinal herbs here.”

The vegetation was thick, making it seem as if only animals would normally weave their way through. We pushed past it as we proceeded through the forest.

“I had intended on teleporting us directly to the lake, but it seems that I miscalculated the coordinates,” Gabriel said.

“I don’t mind. This is kind of exciting—it’s like going on an adventure.” I’d certainly never had the opportunity to wade through this kind of overgrowth before.

“That’s good.” Suddenly, Gabriel turned around and frowned—not out of personal displeasure, though. It was the expression he made whenever he was deeply concerned about something. Before I could ask what had caught his attention, he said, “Fran, your dress is going to get wet. The plants around here are damp with moisture.”

Now that he mentioned it, the sleeves and hem of my dress *were* slightly wet. I hadn’t noticed at all because I’d been so absorbed in exploring.

“Wibble, can you turn into a raincoat to protect Fran’s clothes?” Gabriel asked.

“*Okaaay!*” Wibble pressed itself against my chest and transformed into a transparent cloak. “*Raincoat!*”

“Thank you, Wibble,” I said. “You too, Gabriel, for noticing.”

“*Anytime!*”

Since Gabriel had been leading the way and parting the vegetation for me, there were water droplets in his hair.

“Oh, Gabriel, you’re wet too,” I remarked.

“Where?”

“Stay still for a second.”

I wiped the droplets away with my handkerchief, and his ears flushed slightly red from embarrassment. Apparently he hadn't considered that if I was wet, he must've been too. I wished he would care more about himself, but I also found his absent-minded side extremely adorable.

"Thank you, Fran."

"You're welcome."

The lake was a little farther ahead.

"This is—" Gabriel froze in the middle of his introduction. The lake, which was supposed to be relatively clear, had become as muddy as a swamp. "How in the world did it get so dirty? In the past, it was home to many aquatic animals, like fish, frogs, and shrimp."

The lake's surface was bubbling. It was hard to imagine anything other than monsters surviving within it.

"Fran, please stay away from the lake. I have a bad feeling about this."

"O-Okay."

Gabriel summoned his five slimes and stayed on the alert. He must've sensed something.

"Gabriel, look down!" Wibble yelled.

"What?!"

Without us noticing, the mud from the lake had begun creeping towards him. He swiftly moved back to distance himself from it. At first, it seemed strange for mud to be moving on its own, but upon closer inspection, it had eyes and a mouth. It was undoubtedly a slime.

"Gabriel, is that a normal slime?" I asked.

"It's highly likely that it is not."

Triste had what were called "unique slimes"—slimes that had evolved in ways that no other slimes had. The five differently colored slimes contracted to Gabriel were also unique slimes, and there were no others like them in the world. The red slime had fire properties, the yellow slime had lightning

properties, the blue slime had water properties, the green slime had wind properties, and the black slime had physical properties. Wibble's elemental properties were shrouded in mystery, but it was an extremely rare slime that excelled in both metamorphosis and intelligence. It might have also been the only slime to ever become a spirit. It was definitely very special.

The slime lurking in the swampy lake was clearly different from the other slimes in the area. It had been slithering along the ground like a snake, only to suddenly attack when we noticed its presence. Its long, thin body curved through the air like a whip.

The black slime jumped forwards and slammed into it but didn't seem to deal any damage.

"It's completely made of mud," said Gabriel. "I can't see its core."

With no idea of where the slime's weak point was, there was no choice but to attack it at random. The green slime tried to slice it with a wind blade, only for the muddy slime to light up for a second before turning to sand. The blade passed right through it.

"Wh-What was that?!" Gabriel exclaimed.

The slime appeared to have changed its composition from mud to sand instantly. Even more surprisingly, half of the entire lake had also turned into sand. This slime was clearly incredibly large.

"Wibble, swallow up Fran and hide somewhere," Gabriel ordered.

"Got it!"

Wibble took me into its body and climbed a tree so that we could watch the battle from above. The bird's-eye view allowed us to see the giant slime's whole form—and the fact that the lake was rippling disturbingly. What was going on? How could the slime turning into sand transform the entire lake like this?

If the slime had sand properties, then it was weak to water. Gabriel seemed to come to the same conclusion and commanded the blue slime to attack. However, the enemy slime transformed once again, this time into a fire that evaporated the water attack before it could make contact. The flames spread over the lake, their billowing movements making me anxious that the forest

might catch fire.

“That slime changes its constitution based on its enemy, right?” I asked.

“Could be.”

If I were to give it a name, it'd be “transforming slime.” This was going to be problematic. It could block any kind of attack with its transformations. How was Gabriel going to fight it? I nervously watched the battle unfold.

The transforming slime turned into water to counter the fire slime, then a thundercloud to counter the water slime. For the physical slime, it turned into what seemed like mercury, slipping out of the way of the blows with ease.

“At this rate, Gabriel’s gonna lose.”

“What can he possibly do in this situation?”

Next, Gabriel cast an ice spell, summoning an enormous icicle that skewered the enemy slime. However, the slime transformed into lava, melting the icicle instantly.

“Oh no! Gabriel was proud of that spell.”

Unfortunately, the slime was even capable of defending against Gabriel’s advanced magic. He continued to try different elemental spells, but every single one was skillfully countered. With a look of resignation, he cast an earth spell.

“Oh great earth, tremble and shake! Quake!”

The ground shook, making the slime’s body wobble violently. It lit up again to transform into something that could resist earth magic—but when the tremors intensified, it was forced to first extend its tentacles outwards, grabbing onto the lake’s surroundings for stability. Right after that, it transformed into water, nullifying the attack.

This was the first time the enemy slime had become completely transparent. From atop the tree, I could see its entire body.

“Wow, that’s a big slime!”

“I can see the core!” I exclaimed.

The slime’s weak point was a rock at the bottom of the lake. It was likely stuck

there. That was why the slime had clung for support when Gabriel shook the entire lake—to prevent its body and core from separating.

I quickly reported this to him. “Gabriel! The slime’s core is a rock at the bottom of the lake! It seems to be wedged into the ground!”

“I see. That would explain why it grabbed onto its surroundings when I cast an earth spell.”

“I think so too.”

Gabriel came up with a new plan on the spot. “Pull the slime out of the lake!” he ordered his slimes.

The five slimes all formed tentacles at once and grabbed the transforming slime. However, it turned into sand so that they couldn’t get a good hold on it.

“Now! Use *that*!”

What’s “that”?

The green slime leaped high in the air and spat something at the transforming slime—the sticky plants we’d seen at the previous lake. They spread like a net, covering the transforming slime in its entirety. Earlier, Gabriel had had the green slime eat the vegetation in an attempt to clean Shining Lake, but he hadn’t been able to clear the entire plant infestation because it had extended deep into the water. Who would have thought it would come in handy so soon?

The plants’ sticky coating adhered firmly to the sand, and the green slime instantly began hoisting up the transforming slime. With the help of Gabriel’s other slimes, the transforming slime—despite its frantic struggling—was dragged out of the lake and onto land. Freed from the slime’s influence, the lake turned back into regular water.

“Heave-ho!”

“Pull, pull!”

“Harder!”

“Grrrrr!”

“Almost there!”

The slimes combined their efforts to pull the transforming slime farther away from the lake. Meanwhile, Gabriel summoned the kaolin slime in the hopes of preventing the enemy from escaping back into its home.

“What do you need?” the kaolin slime asked.

“Please fill the lake with kaolin,” said Gabriel.

“Okaaay!”

The kaolin slime released the kaolin it had inside it into the lake, removing any possible point of entry. The transforming slime, which had been brought onto land, trembled in fear. It was still connected to its underwater core by a sort of rope, but if that were cut, the slime would die.

Gabriel approached the transforming slime and began negotiations. “You can either die here or swear loyalty to me. Which will it be?”

The transforming slime bowed in surrender. It didn’t seem like it was going to put up any more of a fight, so Gabriel cast his taming spell, which the slime accepted without resistance. There was a bright flash of light, and through the contract’s blessing, the slime was now able to speak.

“I won’t do anything bad anymore,” the transforming slime said with a whine.

“Very good.”

The contract also gave Gabriel an understanding of the transforming slime’s biology. It turned out that this slime was connected to its core inside the lake, so it was locked to this spot and couldn’t travel around with us like the others.

Gabriel ordered the kaolin slime to remove the kaolin from the lake, then said, “Fran, Wibble, it’s safe to come down now.”

“All right,” I replied. “Wibble, please do.”

“Okaaay!”

Wibble returned to the ground and let me out.

“Fran, were you injured at all?” Gabriel asked.

“No, I’m perfectly fine, thanks to Wibble and your expert instructions.”

“Thank goodness.”

“What about you, Gabriel?”

“I’m fine too.”

“And the other slimes?”

The five differently colored slimes jumped around me energetically.

“Feeling great!”

“That was nothing!”

“Totally OK!”

“As you can see...”

“...we’re fine!”

Much to my relief, it seemed that everyone had escaped the battle unscathed. The transforming slime was docile now, so Gabriel released it from the plant net. Seeing it up close, I realized it was around as large as a carriage wagon. Just standing near it was intimidating. Gabriel said that, in terms of size, it ranked in the top three slimes he’d come across.

“We managed to prevail because you realized the core was at the bottom of the lake, Fran,” he said.

“It’s your achievement, not mine. I was only able to see the core because you kept fighting without giving up.”

“You both accomplished it together!” Wibble cheered. It was right—instead of being humble with each other, we should have been congratulating ourselves.

“Still, it’s unfortunate that our last ray of hope ended up like this,” Gabriel said.

“Indeed.”

The lake was back to normal, but frankly, the water quality didn’t look very good. Plus, it was the transforming slime’s home. It wouldn’t be *impossible* to cultivate pearls here, but it probably wasn’t worth trying.

Gabriel told the transforming slime it could return to the lake, and it rolled in with glee, filling it in the blink of an eye. Then, it turned into mud, and the lake instantly became a swamp.

“Do you enjoy being in that form?” Gabriel asked, exasperated.

“Hmm, not especially!”

“Why do you stay like that, then?”

“So people won’t come!”

“Ah, so that’s how it is.”

What a smart slime, turning the lake into a swamp not because it likes being muddy but to prevent people from approaching it.

“Should I keep it clean from now on?” the transforming slime asked.

“That would be much appreciated,” said Gabriel.

“Okay!”

As soon as it said that, it emitted a bright light, transforming from mud to clear water.

“What?!” Gabriel exclaimed upon seeing the result: a beautiful lake suitable for cultivating pearls. It was just what we were looking for.

“Gabriel, do you think...?”

“Yes!” His hands dipped into the slime immediately, and he was able to scoop it up as if it were real water.

The other slimes copied him, resulting in the transforming slime laughing, “Aha ha ha!” as if it were ticklish. It quickly grew accustomed to the sensation, though, returning to a calm expression.

With a serious look in his eyes, Gabriel asked the transforming slime, “May we use this lake?”

“Sure,” it said without hesitation.

“Fran, we may be able to cultivate pearls here.”

“What a wonderful discovery!” I exclaimed.

Joy welled up within me, and I hugged Gabriel without thinking. He caught me and returned my embrace. Wibble and the other slimes bounced in a circle around us.

“You did it!”

“Yay!”

“It’s a huge success!”

“Great work!”

“We’re feasting tonight!”

“Woooo!”

Not only did those slimes rejoice with us, the transforming slime also raised its tentacle hands in the air and said, *“I hope it goes well!”*

After returning home, Gabriel and I held a small celebration. The wine we were served was one out of several we were sampling for our wedding reception. Gabriel wanted only the finest choice for our guests, so we had to taste around fifty bottles before our big day. Drinking them normally would have been boring, so we’d decided to have one whenever we had something to celebrate. However, we certainly weren’t going to have fifty such things, so lately, we’d been stretching the definition with reasons like “To commemorate not being attacked by slimes!” and “To celebrate that my mother was in a good mood today!”

“It feels great to have a legitimate cause for celebration,” Gabriel said.

“It does,” I replied. *“It was also fun toasting to the celebrations you tried so hard to think of, though.”*

“Is that so? If we hadn’t found that lake today, I was going to say, ‘A toast to the talented and amazing Fran!’”

“I’m really glad we found it.”

“We’ll have to save that celebration for next time.”

Even if he was just praising me, I did *not* want that. *I’ll need to make sure we accomplish something tomorrow so we can celebrate that instead,* I thought, steeling my resolve.



Now that we'd found a lake to house our pearl farm, it was time to get started. But first, we had to make some adjustments to its surroundings. Gabriel put up a magic barrier to prevent wild slimes or tourists from wandering inside the area, and his tamed slimes built a fence with lumber from the mansion to keep wild animals out. By the time I visited three days later, it had become a proper facility, with a small cabin and a roof covering the lake to block the sun's rays.

"Fran, what do you think?" Gabriel asked.

"It must've been a lot of work to get all of this set up in such a short amount of time," I replied.

"Yes. It was necessary, though. We need to get started as soon as possible."

Our wedding was scheduled for early spring, and it was currently late autumn. We only had a few months left. Even if we finished producing the pearls, there was still the issue of whether they could be processed in time. Right now, all I could do was pray for a future in which the pearl cultivation was successful.

"Gabriel, I know we just arrived, but would you like to take a short break?" I asked. "I made us lunch." I had woken up early to do so, and the fruits of my efforts were inside the basket that Gabriel was carrying for me. "I hope it's to your liking."

"I'll always look forward to your home cooking."

"You said the other day that you wanted to have a picnic by the lake, so here we are."

"I can't believe it's happening so soon. It's like a dream come true."

"Oh, now you're exaggerating again."

I sat down on the picnic blanket Wibble laid out for us and began arranging the food and preparing Triste's trademark fragrant tea in a magicite-powered pot. The cups and saucers were the porcelain workshop's new products, made by mixing the kaolin with powdered slime to enhance its durability. Mysteriously, this porcelain became transparent when fired. It was much tougher than other porcelain and ceramics and wouldn't break even if it fell to the ground. It had seemed like these cups and saucers would be good for

outdoor excursions like picnics, so I'd brought them outside for the first time today.

As I was cheerfully laying everything out, Gabriel gave me a worried look and asked, "Fran, are you sure about using those cups? They contain slime."

"They have your seal of approval, so they must be safe, and besides, they're wonderfully made. Is there an issue with them?"

"No, but wouldn't you rather not directly touch something containing slime with your mouth?"

"You've guaranteed that they're safe to use, so it's completely fine," I replied with a smile.

Gabriel hung his head weakly. "What am I going to do with you...?"

"Did I say something strange?"

"Perhaps, yes. Normally, people wouldn't want to use products containing slimes."

"Is that so?" I tilted my head. Gabriel had experimented with slime ceramics for many years, and he used them himself. They didn't have any adverse effects on the body, nor could you tell by sight that they were made with slimes. They appeared to be nothing more than pretty cups that were clear like glass. "Even if they did have some kind of effect on me, you would do something about it, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, of course. I would do everything in my power to save you."

"What is there to be worried about, then?" I squeezed his hand and told him my honest feelings to quell his fears. "I assure you all of your inventions are safe and brilliant. Won't you trust me?"

"Ngh! If you phrase it that way, I can't argue back."

"But it's true, isn't it?"

Gabriel heaved a long sigh. "I worry too much. Even I think it's a problem."

"That's not true. I'm *too* optimistic, so I think it's good that you're a bit of a worrywart."

“So if we averaged ourselves together, the result would be just right?”

I nodded firmly at his conclusion.

As we were chatting, Wibble poured our tea.

“Fra, Gabriel, go ahead and take your break!”

“Thank you, Wibble,” I said.

“Yes, thank you,” said Gabriel.

Sipping the Triste tea made me feel refreshed. I was now very accustomed to this flavor.

“Was it difficult to make all of this food?” Gabriel asked.

“No, I enjoyed it. These are actually the dishes we’re considering for the reception banquet.” Along with my mother-in-law, the head chef and I had thought of the menu together. “I tried making quite a few things. Would you mind taste testing them?”

“Not a problem. I can’t wait to try them.”

I had him start with the soup, which had given me the most trouble. It was stored in a thermos that was imbued with a heat-insulating spell. I poured it into a bowl.

“This is a herbal consommé made with poultry stock,” I explained. The stock was the key to the dish. It was called “fond de cuisine,” and it was an essential of royal cooking. “It’s the soup the head chef is most proud of. He makes it by simmering a bird whole.”

Other ingredients included poultry bones, potherbs, medicinal herbs, salt, and pepper, all boiled with the poultry of choice. The resulting cloudy soup was strained and left to cool. Then, the fat that floated to the surface was skimmed off, and milk, butter, and flour were added as thickening. Finally, it was garnished with minced, locally grown herbs: parsley, estragon, chervil, and chives.

“The dish was a team effort,” I said. “Go ahead and try it.”

“I will, thank you.”

I nervously watched Gabriel take a sip.

“It’s...delicious! It’s smooth and rich, but not excessively so, and it has depth to its flavor. It has a mild, pleasant taste, though, perhaps because of the milk and butter. I think anyone would enjoy it, child or adult.”



It was a relief to hear Gabriel's feedback. "Great," I said. "I was actually trying to make a soup that would appeal to a wide age range."

My mother-in-law had pushed for a luxurious shrimp soup, while the head chef had been set on veal. However, I had suggested something simpler that people would find familiar and relaxing.

"We're not only inviting nobles, after all," I continued. "I don't want anyone to be intimidated by the food." Perhaps it was my interactions with the people in the old part of town that gave me this perspective. "I once asked a neighbor to teach me how to cook, but she told me, 'I don't know how to make anything that nobles eat.' It made me realize that not everyone ate the same things that I had in the past. That was when I first learned that ingredients like goose liver, truffles, and caviar were so costly that commoners could never hope to afford them with their wages."

Commoners had the impression that royal cuisine was expensive and high-class—so out of reach that a single meal would cost a month's earnings.

"I was thinking that this soup would feel familiar to them because it uses a lot of Triste's local specialties, like poultry and medicinal herbs," I concluded.

"You put a lot of thought into it," Gabriel remarked.

"Of course."

The soup would be served first, to warm the stomach and put the guests in a comfortable mood. Then, it was time for the hors d'oeuvres. I felt quite confident in them after hearing Gabriel's high praise for the soup.

I explained the various dishes that I had packed into the picnic basket. "For the hors d'oeuvres, we have fried potatoes, steamed and simmered turnips, stuffed mushrooms, candied carrots, and jellied shrimp."

As for the mains, the fish courses were simmered crayfish with medicinal herbs, creamy whitefish gratin, aromatic fried trout, and shrimp soufflé. The meat courses were poultry pie, whole roast chicken, roasted lamb, and grilled skewers. I had cut all of them into bite-size pieces so that Gabriel could sample a bit of each.

“The main courses are wonderful too,” he said. “They all use ingredients that are common in Triste.”

We hadn’t decided on dessert courses yet. For today, I had made just one type.

“I tried making crepes,” I said. “There’s berry sauce inside them. Actually, the highlight of crepes is their crisp shells, so I’d like to serve them fresh if possible.”

“How about inviting a pastry chef to the venue and having them prepare the crepes after guests place their orders?” Gabriel suggested.

“That’s an amazing idea! Everyone would be able to eat the most delicious crepes that way!” I pointed out that it would also be nice if we could prepare several types of sauces and let guests choose which they wanted. That would be more enjoyable for people of all ages. “I want to make the sauces match the colors of your slimes.”

“It’s a great thought, but wouldn’t black and blue be difficult?”

“Now that you mention it, yes. I think sesame would work for black, but is there anything that’s blue?”

Wibble raised its tentacle and asked, “*What about making the sauce with a type of blue fish?*”

“B-Blue fish?” I stammered. “Um, thank you for your suggestion. I’ll look into it later.”

“Fran, you should be honest and say that it’d never work,” Gabriel said.

“Grr!”

I really did appreciate the input, though. *I’ll incorporate blue fish into another dish.*

“I’m also wondering about welcome treats,” I said. “What kinds of sweets would work well as easy-to-eat bite-size pieces?”

“Everything you make is wonderfully delicious, but if I had to choose, I’d suggest the baked sweets you used to consign to the pastry store in the old part of the capital.”

“Those *are* the kinds of sweets commoners love.”

At the time, I had been using old recipes I had learned from nuns while doing charity work with my sister. Much to my dismay, none of my pastries had sold at first. But one day, they’d suddenly started flying off the shelves. I had rejoiced, but later, I had discovered that Gabriel had been buying them all out. Apparently he had attended the soiree where my sister had been banished from the country, her engagement revoked. However, he hadn’t been able to defend me when the verbal attacks had come my way, and his guilt had led him to buy my sweets in an attempt to help me.

I giggled. “All of that time spent baking sweets every day in the old part of town feels nostalgic now. Did you share the sweets you bought with your employees?”

“Of course not! I savored each and every one.”

“But there were a lot, weren’t there?”

“I created an enhanced cold storage to preserve them.”

“I-I see.” I had heard from Solene, my friend who worked at the pastry store, that Gabriel would buy out all of my sweets every time I delivered a new batch. I was stunned to learn that he had been eating them all by himself.

“Before I formally met you, eating your homemade sweets was the only happiness in my life. I had rarely eaten sweets before that, but yours were truly delicious.”

“Thank you, Gabriel.” The pastries I had consigned to the store included soufflés, butter cakes, baked meringues, and cookies. “They’re all things that can be prepared in bulk, so they’ll make perfect welcome treats. I have a better picture in mind thanks to you.”

“I’m glad I could be of help.”

Not only were we enjoying our picnic, we were also settling on ideas for the wedding reception. It was a very fruitful time. With the picnic finished and my choices sorted, it was time for me to go home, but Gabriel asked me to wait.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

“I’ve been experimenting with the pearl cultivation.”

Emilie had provided us with oysters and grains to get started with. Gabriel explained that he had put the grains into the oysters and submerged them into the lake, which the transforming slime was keeping clean. He pulled on a rope tied to a stake near the water, revealing three oysters in a net. After picking one up, he dipped it in a special magical liquid, prompting it to twitch as if it were having a coughing fit. A few spasms later, it spat something out.

“It’s a pearl!” I exclaimed.

“Yes!”

After coughing up the pearl, the oyster was soaked in water that had powdered magicite dissolved in it. It would stay there for three days before being returned to the lake, where it would rest for half a year.

“The oysters are supposed to be disposed of after producing pearls, but I wondered if we couldn’t keep them alive and reuse them,” Gabriel said.

Emilie had only given us a few oysters to experiment with. If we succeeded, she would lend us more of the oysters the ogre duke’s territory had in captivity. I nervously waited to see the fruits of our labor.

Gabriel picked up our first attempt at an aurora pearl and wiped off the moisture. “Th-This is...”

“Um, how do I put it...?” I murmured.

The pearl was an extremely distorted shape instead of a perfect sphere. To make matters worse, it didn’t have the beautiful aurora coloring. It was a bit of a dirty white. We checked the other pearls, but they were no different.

“What does this mean, Gabriel?” I asked.

“I’m not sure. I think I’ll be able to figure out something, though. I’ll take a night to analyze them.”

For now, he’d have to bring the trial pearls home and investigate the issue.

“I’m sorry, Fran,” he said. “I spoiled our enjoyable picnic with these disappointing results.”

“It’s fine. We can’t expect everything to go well right away.”

“That’s true.”

However, when I thought of them as products of Triste, even the dull pearls looked precious. “It’s amazing that we can make pearls in Triste.”

“Now that you mention it, yes. It’s shocking that this region’s lakes have the potential to produce pearls.”

After that, we teleported home and relayed the results of the experiment to my mother-in-law. Although the pearl cultivation hadn’t gone as expected, we had decided on a direction for the food to be served at the reception, so it had been a productive day.

The next day, Gabriel told me the results of his investigation.

“The reason for the pearls’ warped shapes is likely due to our water’s properties differing from that of the ogre duke’s territory. Our freshwater lakes won’t be exactly the same as theirs because of environmental differences. I’ll need to analyze the ogre duke’s territory’s water.”

“I’ll ask Emilie if she can send us some, then.”

“Please do.”

And so, that day, I sent Emilie a letter asking her to provide us with a water sample.



We waited for our delivery. However, what arrived by wyvern was not a shipment but Emilie herself.

“Lady Emilie? What brings you here?” I asked, noticing that she wasn’t her usual bubbly self. She seemed tired and listless.

“I’m sorry for visiting without advance notice,” she said.

“We’re friends, aren’t we? It’s no trouble at all.”

I decided to invite her to the parlor first before inquiring further. After a cup of warm tea and the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s new raspberry mille-feuille, she

regained much of her energy.

“Your sweets are always so delicious, Lady Francette.”

“Thank you. It’s actually the first time we’ve served this to a guest.”

“Really?! That makes me feel special!”

It was a relief to see her back to her usual cheer. “So, did something happen?” I asked. I knew she wouldn’t have shown up here out of the blue for no reason.

Emilie’s expression darkened. She looked down and said, “Things have gotten complicated at home. My family started insisting that they want to sell the pearl-cultivation technique to someone else.”

Her family didn’t know that she was sharing the technique with the slime duke. It was a secret initiative she’d taken using her authority as the ogre duke.

“But one day, my uncle noticed the book on pearl cultivation was missing and kicked up a fuss. He started pointing fingers at family members, so I told him I’d changed the hiding place, but now he’s yelling that he wants to see the actual book. I couldn’t take it anymore, so when the wyvern courier came, I asked to hitch a ride.”

In other words, Emilie came to Triste because she was running away from her uncle.

“It sounds like they have a buyer in mind,” I said.

“I have no intention of selling it to someone I don’t know, but my uncle is being really persistent.”

“It must’ve been hard for you.”

“Yes...”

I suggested that she stay in Triste until things calmed down, but she shook her head.

“If I do that, my uncle will follow me here,” she said. “I can’t trouble you like that.”

“I’m worried about you, though.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m the ogre duke, after all!”

Gabriel had explained to me before how this young girl had become the ogre duke. Apparently, the title was only given to whoever in the ducal family could move an enormous rock in the ogre duke's domain. After twenty years without a successful candidate, the beautiful Emilie had accomplished the feat and had become ogre duke despite her young age and delicate frame.

As an aside, in the case of multiple people being capable of moving the rock, the heir was decided by a contest of strength. The other family members had attempted it, thinking, "If Emilie can do it, surely I can too," but none had succeeded. In other words, Emilie was the strongest member of the ogre duke family.

"Um, Lady Emilie, may I ask what you mean by being 'fine'?"

"I'm only going easy on my uncle for the time being. If he persists in being stubborn, I'll *force* him to listen to me. I'm giving him a chance to rethink the sale, but if he continues to defy me, I won't show him mercy."

"I-I see." Where in that slender frame of hers did she hide the physical strength to move a huge boulder? It was truly a mystery. But at any rate, she seemed to have the power to solve this issue on her own, so I didn't have to worry too much.

"Anyway, I brought some water from the lake," she continued.

"Thank you."

"The pearls weren't successful, I heard."

"Gabriel suspects it's an issue with the water's properties."

"The water's properties... Oh!" Emilie clapped her hands together. "The lakes in my territory are spring water! And the climate is very different from Triste's. It could very well be a matter of water properties and environmental differences."

Perhaps it would be best to have Gabriel sit in for the rest of the discussion. He'd asked me to let him know when the water sample arrived, so I had Constance call for him.

A few minutes later, Gabriel arrived.

“I apologize for the intrusion, Your Grace,” said Emilie.

“No worries,” Gabriel replied. “You’re always welcome here.”

“If we may get right down to business, I’ve brought the lake water as promised.”

“Ah, thank you. This will be a great help.” Gabriel showed Emilie the results of the initial experiment. “These are the pearls we made the other day. As you can see, they’re misshapen.”

“Oh my! I’ve never seen pearls shaped like this.”

The ogre duke’s territory also produced irregularly shaped pearls called “baroque pearls.” However, those were popular because they had the same luster and smoothness as other pearls—the distorted shapes instead gave each of them a coveted, unique appearance. On the other hand, Gabriel’s prototypes lacked that same distinctive, beautiful shine pearls were supposed to have.

“I can’t call it a success,” said Gabriel.

“Indeed,” said Emilie.

“I surmised that it was an issue with the water’s properties, but I haven’t been able to determine the specific cause.”

“We should figure it out as soon as possible.”

Gabriel had brought a water-testing kit that he’d invented, so he quickly began analyzing the provided sample. After he poured the water onto a thin piece of glass with a spell drawn on it, a magic circle appeared. Looking at it, he murmured, “So that’s what it was.” He didn’t seem surprised—it sounded more like he had confirmed an inner suspicion.

“It appears that the ogre duke’s lakes contain trace amounts of salt,” he explained.

“Does that mean it’s not fresh water?” I asked.

“No, it is definitely fresh water.”

Apparently the term “fresh water” applied to any water that was very low in salinity. It didn’t have to be completely pure.

“So you were right—it was an issue with the water’s properties,” I said.

“Yes. The results show not only that the water in the ogre duke’s lakes is slightly salty but also that it’s composed of melted snow.”

“Lady Emilie, does your territory get cold in the winter?”

“That’s right,” Emilie said. “The lakes freeze over during that time, so before that happens, we retrieve all of the oysters and transfer them to water tanks.”

“I see.”

Thin sheets of ice would sometimes form over the lakes here, but they always melted by noon. It seemed that our environments were completely different.

“I suspect that the oysters could not adapt to Triste’s lakes,” Gabriel said. “Simply surviving took precedence over producing pearls. Cultivating pearls with oysters native to the ogre duke’s territory will prove difficult. We could perhaps create a facility to replicate the territory’s lakes and climate, but it would take far too long.”

“I suppose it’s impossible to cultivate pearls in time for the wedding, then,” I said.

“No, it’s not impossible,” said Gabriel. It seemed like he still had a plan. “If the oysters cannot adapt to Triste’s lakes, then we simply have to find shellfish here that are already compatible.”

Until Gabriel had brought it up, I hadn’t considered the idea. “Do all shellfish produce pearls?”

“Yes. Generally, any mollusk with a shell will instinctively try to eliminate foreign substances from its body. However, only those with shells that are beautifully lustrous on the inside can produce the kind of pearls that can be sold on the market. Some should exist in Triste’s lakes too.”

“Then we just have to find them, right?”

“Right.”

A glimmer of hope shone through the dark clouds that had gathered over our pearl cultivation project.

Emilie was excited too. “I’m really looking forward to seeing Triste’s pearls.”

“I’ll have something good to report next time, so please wait until then,” said Gabriel.

I was thinking of giving Emilie a tour of the village, but she said she intended on returning to the ogre duke’s territory.

“Really?!” I asked. “Why don’t you stay awhile and enjoy yourself?”

“I know you’re both busy with your wedding preparations,” Emilie said. “I also don’t want my uncle to have free rein while I’m away, so I’ll be going back soon.”

I gathered a variety of the Lakeside Duck Bakery sweets I had at home and gave them to her as a souvenir. Gabriel also presented her with some slime-based products that were popular among the villagers.

“Wow!” Emilie exclaimed. “You’re giving me this much in exchange for just a bit of water?”

“It’s only natural when you came all this way to see us,” I said. “Right, Gabriel?”

“Of course,” Gabriel said.

Emilie beamed at us as she rode the wyvern back home.

After we saw her off, Gabriel looked at me and said, “Now then, I’m going to go shellfish hunting at the lake. Would you care to join me, Fran?”

“I would,” I said.

It looked as though Wibble and the five differently colored slimes were intending to accompany us. Strangely enough, Alexandrine the duck wanted to tag along too—she was quacking insistently at my feet.

“Um, Gabriel, it seems like she also wants to come,” I said.

“That’s fine. Let’s bring her with us.”

And so, we were joined by Alexandrine and her caretaker, Nico. I tied up my hair and changed into an apron dress so that I wouldn’t have to worry about getting my clothes dirty. Once I was ready, we headed for the lake.

We teleported, and the scenery around us changed instantly. Gabriel explained that when he was a child, he had played at this lake with his father.

Slimes floated nonchalantly along the water's surface. Alexandrine, being the very cautious duck that she was, didn't so much as touch the lake. She just stood in place with a tense look on her face.

Nico wasn't accustomed to seeing so many slimes, so she screamed when she saw the lake. "Eek! There are so many slimes! Aren't you scared, Lady Francette?"

"I am, but I know that Gabriel will protect us, so it's fine," I said.

"Ohhh, that's the power of true love!"

It was kind of embarrassing to hear it phrased that way. And judging by Gabriel's slightly flushed ears, he'd heard Nico's words too.

Gabriel turned around with a calm expression and pushed the bridge of his glasses up, then said, "This lake was relatively clean when I was a child, so it upsets me that the number of slimes here has been increasing by the year. My father hardly did any slime extermination when he was the slime duke, so why is it that, despite my best efforts, there are *more* of them during my rule?!"

The lake was brimming with slimes, so we had to be careful. They all appeared to be relaxing and enjoying the water, but their gazes were firmly fixed on us. If we let down our guard, they would probably attack us.

"We need to do something about the slimes first," said Gabriel. He picked up the green slime and tossed it in the direction of the lake.

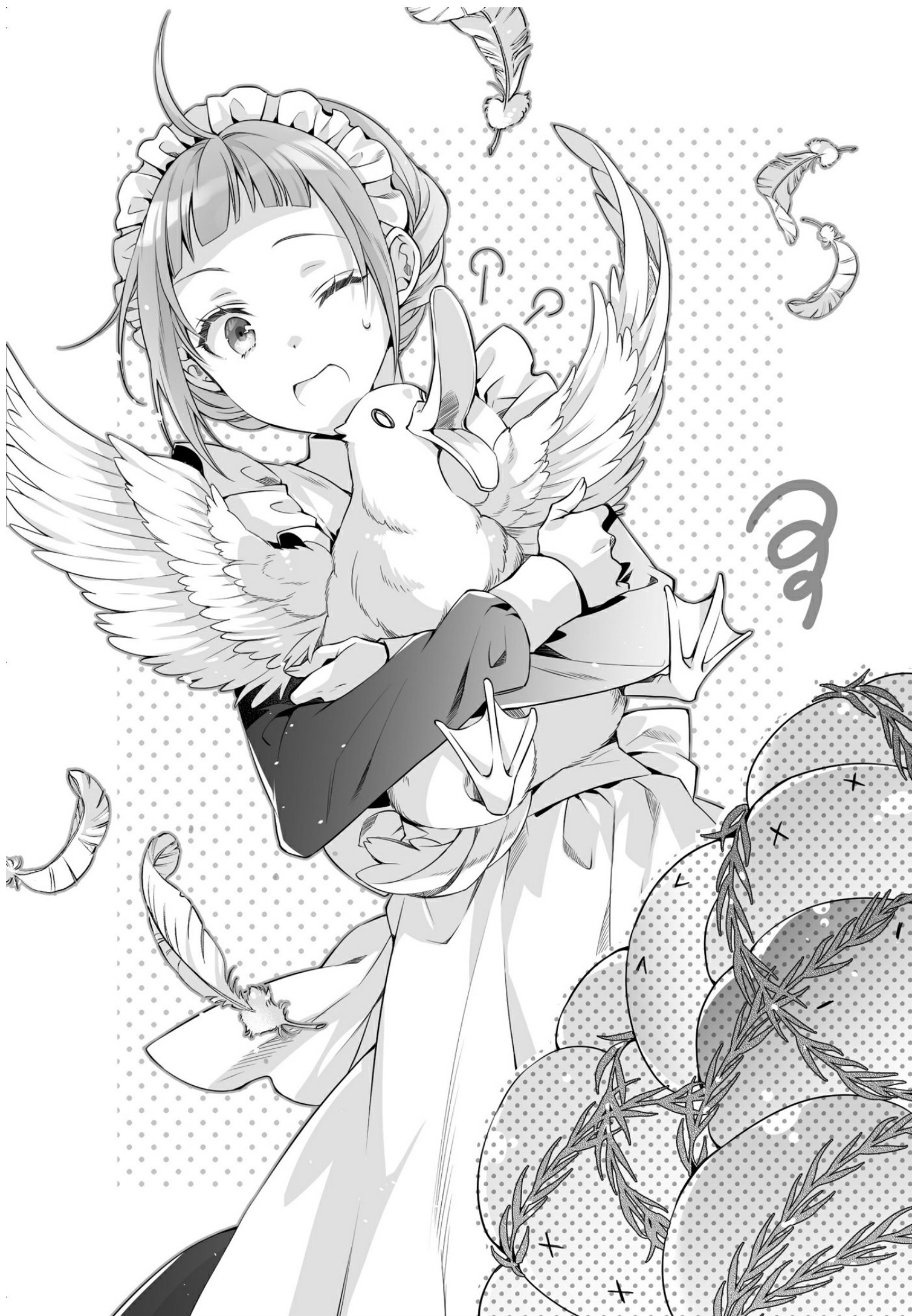
"*Whaaaaat?!*" the slime shrieked, spewing plants from its mouth that immediately trapped all the slimes that were in the lake.

The yellow slime stretched itself into a long, thin rope, which the black slime hurled at the web of plants. With one end of its rope form, it grabbed onto the sticky vegetation. It then stretched its other end to the remaining tamed slimes and they began pulling on it. They hauled the slime-filled net onto shore in no time at all.

Having decided that the restrained slimes were no longer a threat,

Alexandrine began pecking furiously at them. Nico plucked her from the ground and exclaimed, “Alexandrine, even if they can’t move, they’re dangerous!” The duck flailed around in Nico’s arms, still raring for a fight.

“Please stand back, everyone,” said Gabriel. “We’ll finish the slimes off.”



The yellow slime leaped forwards and electrocuted the rounded-up slimes, and they hardened upon impact. Under its continued attack, the slimes died while maintaining their stiffened forms. Later, Gabriel would retrieve them so that they could be used in products.

And so, the slimes were easily defeated. Nico cheered, “Oooh!” while Alexandrine quacked loudly, perhaps as a victory cry.

Their impressed reactions prompted me to praise the unique slimes. “That was a great haul, everyone!”

The unique slimes giggled in embarrassment. They sort of reminded me of Gabriel. Speaking of whom, it appeared that the aquatic plants he’d gathered from Shining Lake had come in handy yet again.

The blue slime dived into the lake in search of any remaining hidden slimes. Gabriel defeated those as well before casting a spell to repel other slimes.

“Now we’ll be able to look for shellfish in peace,” he said. “My father and I used to visit this lake when I was a child. You see, our relatives would gather for hunting contests, but my father wasn’t one for such things.”

It was rare for Gabriel to bring up his father, who had left Triste. He probably avoided doing so because it was a sensitive topic for his mother.

“He was extremely meek—the kind of person who derived more pleasure from reading books and gaining knowledge than from hunting beasts with guns. He was very reserved, with no desire for fame or success. On days when our relatives held hunting tournaments, they would leave their children at home, but my father was different. He would instead pick up a book, leave the gun at home, and bring me outside with him. Then he would use the book to teach me about the creatures that lived in this lake. We would even catch fish and frogs, observe waterfowl, and look for shellfish to learn about their biology. It was all so new and exciting for me.”

Gabriel got his looks from his mother, but it seemed like his personality stemmed from his father.

“Fran, were you thinking that my personality resembles my father’s?”

“I was.”

“I suspected as much.”

“Does it bother you?”

“My father wasn’t suited for governance, so I can’t help but wonder if I’m not either.”

“You’re a wonderful duke, and I’m sure your father was too.”

“Well, in the end, he did abandon both me and my mother.”

Gabriel’s mother would always proclaim, “My husband left Triste because he couldn’t stand all the nature!” But Gabriel’s story made me think that wasn’t true. His father wouldn’t have brought books outdoors unless he loved nature.

“Looking back, I wonder if my father had a hard time dealing with our relatives,” Gabriel continued. “My great-uncle was very overbearing at the time.”

“Ah...”

Gabriel’s cousins and great-uncle were certainly unique individuals. It must’ve been difficult for his father to come to an unfamiliar land, be entrusted with the title of slime duke, and exercise leadership as the head of this family.

“There were times when I resented my father for leaving,” Gabriel said. He had been forced to take on the role of slime duke at a young age due to his father’s abscondence. “But now that I’m an adult, I think I can somewhat understand how my father felt when he left. I do hope that he is living a happy life somewhere, but I have no desire to see him again. That may sound irresponsible and harsh, though.”

“Why, what a coincidence. I feel the same way about my father.” My father had caused me more than his fair share of strife. I wasn’t angry enough to lash out at him, but I hoped he would live out the rest of his life without making trouble for others.

“I’d never have guessed.”

“It looks like we’re in the same boat.”

“Indeed.”

After expressing our mixed feelings about our fathers, we began the search for shellfish. The lake seemed a bit cleaner with the slimes gone.

Gabriel stepped into the lake with his waterproof boots. Realizing it was now safe, Alexandrine jumped in too. Nico followed after her, shouting, “Alexandrine, you mustn’t go too far! Please stay in the shallows if possible!” The duck quacked loudly in response, though Nico’s admonishments could very well have been falling on deaf ears.

From where I was standing, I could just make out that Gabriel had found some small conches. “These aren’t suitable for pearl production,” he said. We needed a bivalve mollusk—one with a two-part hinged shell—that was of a certain size.

“But you’re sure there are bivalve mollusks in here?” I asked.

“Absolutely.” He picked up a thin branch and stuck it into the water. “Caught one.”

“Huh?!”

Gabriel took the branch out. There was a black bivalve mollusk clamped onto the tip of his stick. He waded back to shore and pulled the shellfish off the branch. “This should have a nacreous layer.” Twisting the end of a knife in between the mollusk’s valves, he popped the shell open, revealing the pearlescent luster within.

“You were right.”

“I vaguely recalled using these as fishing bait when I was five or six years old. It seems I remembered correctly. These black mollusks are common in Triste. They should be able to produce pearls.”

“I’m sure they will!” *And since they coexist with slimes, they should be compatible with the transforming slime’s lake.*

“Please wait there, Fran. I’ll look for more of them.”

“I want to catch one too. How do you do it?”

“Huh?! But your clothes—and the rest of you—will get dirty.”

“That’s okay. I came prepared to get wet and muddy.” My long boots were waterproof, and I could lift the skirt of my dress a bit. “I won’t go too deep, I promise.”

Gabriel sighed.

“I can’t?”

“It’s fine. Let’s do it together.” Perhaps concluding that there was no point in trying to stop me, with an exasperated look on his face, he began explaining how to catch the shellfish. “First, find a shell that’s half buried in the mud. If you try to reach for it with your hands, it’ll sink underground before you can grab it, which is why we’re using a wooden stick. Mollusks keep their shells slightly open so that they can breathe. When you insert the branch into the gap, the shell closes. Pull on the branch when this happens and you’ll catch the mollusk without fail. That’s all there is to it.”

“Understood. Thank you. I’ll give it a try.” I gathered my skirt to just above knee height and affixed the excess fabric about my waist before going to look for shells with Wibble.

“Fran, you shouldn’t expose yourself like that in the presence of others,” Gabriel cautioned me.

“I know.”

“It’s not safe in front of me either.”

“Did you say something?”

“No, it wasn’t important.”

Wibble, who had heard what Gabriel had said, tried to repeat his words, but Gabriel hurriedly covered the slime’s mouth. I was curious, but the two of them were an amusing sight, so I decided not to pry further.

It was my first time stepping into a lake. I timidly trod forwards into the water. The ground was sludgy—as I stopped moving, my feet began to sink deeper and deeper. If I didn’t focus, I’d get stuck. I’d tried taking firm steps so that I wouldn’t fall, but now I couldn’t pull my feet out.

“Fra, are you okay?”

“Yes, I’m fi— Ahhh!”

“Fran!”

The moment I lost balance, Gabriel pulled me to him by the waist.

“Th-Thank you,” I said.

“It’s easy to get stuck in the mud, so please be careful.”

“I-I can see that now.”

After that, I found myself surrounded by the six unique slimes. Whenever my body tilted even slightly, they all extended their tentacles to keep me upright.

“Th-Thank you, everyone,” I said.

“It’s nothing!”

“We’ll all protect you!”

“Relax!”

“We’ve got you!”

“Don’t worry!”

“Keep at it!”

After walking around for a while, I got used to the mud. Just as I was about to announce I didn’t need their assistance anymore, I noticed Gabriel looking at me with worry. It would probably be best to stay with the unique slimes for the sake of reassuring him.

I peered into the water, but it was so muddy that I couldn’t spot any shellfish. Perhaps because it was taking me so long, Wibble dived in to search for them.

“Pwah! There’s one here!”

“Um, where?”

“Here! Right here!”

There were many rocks in the mud, so it was hard to discern stones from shells. As if sensing my struggle, the green slime sucked up the remaining algae in the area, making it easier to see the bottom of the lake.

“Oh, found it!” At last, I spotted the half-buried shell Wibble was talking about. As Gabriel had said, its valves were slightly separated and it appeared to be breathing. I inserted the tip of my branch and it immediately clamped onto it.

“Now!” Wibble shouted.

I pulled the stick out, fishing up the shell. “I caught it!” It was a large mollusk, about the size of my fist.

The unique slimes applauded me.

“Look, Gabriel,” I said.

“It’s a splendid catch.”

“Yes, it is!”

In the time I had spent struggling to gather a single shellfish, Gabriel had managed around ten. Nico had also found five while trailing after Alexandrine.

“She told me where they were,” Nico explained.

“I-I didn’t know she had that talent,” I replied.

We’d caught many more mollusks than expected.

“These should be more than enough since we’re still in the trial stage,” Gabriel said. “I’ll transfer them to the other lake after cleaning off the mud.”

To remove said grime, the blue slime shot water out of its mouth at the mollusks. Once they were washed, their shells had a beautiful jet-black sheen, the color of crows.

“Gabriel, what are these mollusks called?” I asked.

“W-Well...” He gazed into the distance, a wistful look on his face. Perhaps my question brought back painful memories of his father.

“I’m sorry. Is it difficult to discuss?”

“No...I just wasn’t sure how to answer. These mollusks are commonly referred to as ‘gutter clams.’”

Apparently the people of Triste called them that because they were found in

the channels that drained the fields.

“When I was a child, I saw one and brought it home because I thought it was beautiful. However, the gardener looked at it and said, ‘That’s a gutter clam.’ I was shocked to learn that it had such an ugly name. I hesitated to answer your question because I realized that if we were to use these to make pearls, the locals would probably call them ‘gutter pearls.’”

“I see.” I’d never expected them to have such a nickname.

“They’re formally known as ‘freshwater black mussels,’ though. They seem to be endemic to Triste.”

“Really?! That means if you succeed in cultivating pearls within them, the pearls will be one of a kind.”

“Yes, so when that happens, I’d like you to give them a lovely name.”

“I’ll start thinking of ideas.” *I’ll come up with a name that would make anyone want to own them.*

“Now then, I suppose it’s time I bring home gutter clams once again. Hopefully the second time’s the charm.”

“Gabriel...please don’t make me laugh.”

“That was the goal.”

“Oh, you!”

His amusing use of the mollusks’ nickname almost made me forget their real name. I’d have to be careful not to call them gutter clams. I told Nico and Alexandrine they were forbidden from saying it too.



The freshwater black mussels we’d gathered had adapted well to the transforming slime’s lake.

“This is a great start, Gabriel,” I said.

“Indeed.”

The next step was to insert the grains that the pearls would form around. I was allowed to help this time.

“First, place the mussels in this box and prompt them to open their mouths,” Gabriel instructed. The box was divided into sections, one for each mussel. “When you face one’s mouth upwards, it becomes harder for it to breathe, so its shell opens wider. Use a small wedge to keep it from closing. Then insert the grain that will become the pearl’s core. This process damages the mussel, so we then immerse it in water with powdered magicite dissolved in it and give it some time to recuperate.”

After about half a day, when the mussels recovered, they would be lined up in a net and submerged in the lake. From there, it would be another three to seven days before the pearls were ready.

I listened to Gabriel’s instructions and observed him as he demonstrated the process.

“Freshwater black mussels have sharp shells, so be careful not to cut your hands on the edges,” he said.

“Understood.”

After watching him insert three pearl cores, I gave it a try. I’d handled shellfish before while cooking, but this was my first time doing so for pearl cultivation. I slowly went through the steps, taking care not to harm the mussel. Wibble held a slime lamp in its right tentacle to illuminate my hands. Its left tentacle was holding a magnifying glass up to the mussel.

“You’re awfully eager to assist Fran, Wibble,” said Gabriel. “When I was doing this, you merely spectated.”

“Didn’t feel like it, sorry!”

“So it wasn’t that you didn’t *know* how to help but that you didn’t *want* to?!”

“Yep!”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I listened to their conversation, and it made my hands shake. The mussel would become overburdened if I didn’t hurry. I gathered my focus, trying to block out what Wibble and Gabriel were saying.

I enthusiastically brought my tweezers close to one of the tiny grains. Since it was much smaller than a typical pearl, it was very difficult to pick up.

“You can do it,” Wibble cheered softly so as not to break my concentration.

I managed to grasp the core and insert it into the mussel. Then I removed the wedge and placed the mussel into the container.

“Phew, I did it,” I said.

“You did well for your first time,” said Gabriel. Apparently he had been standing behind me to observe.

I was relieved that I’d been able to do it without issue. *“Let’s keep up the pace,”* I said.

“Yes, let’s.”

After about an hour, we’d finished preparing a total of ten mussels.



We received a sealed letter that contained the mayor’s proposal for the name of the festival that would be held on our wedding day. He had already narrowed it down to one idea, and he seemed quite confident in it.

I nervously opened the envelope and found the words *“Festival of Love in Commemoration of Lord Gabriel and Lady Francette’s Marriage.”*

The moment I saw the name, I felt all of the energy evacuate my body. *“Th- This is too embarrassing!”* I never would have dreamed that the festival would be named after us. Gabriel had said the other day that he wanted it to become an annual event. I would be far too embarrassed to participate in an event called the *“Second Annual Festival of Love in Commemoration of Lord Gabriel and Lady Francette’s Marriage.”*

I summoned Nico, Rico, and Coco and asked them what they thought of the mayor’s suggestion.

“Oh...”

“Um...”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Please give me your honest opinion,” I said.

The three of them seemed to be conversing with their eyes. It didn’t surprise

me that the triplets were able to communicate without words. I imagined it was the presence of our names that was making it difficult for them to answer.

“To be honest, I think this is a name that would embarrass not only you and Lord Gabriel but also us as citizens,” Rico said, acting as a mouthpiece for all three girls.

“That’s what I thought,” I said. “I was right, wasn’t I?”

Nico, Rico, and Coco nodded simultaneously.

“The mayor said in his letter that it’s only a suggestion,” I continued. “If we have a better name, he’ll use it.”

In other words, we had to come up with a name *other* than “Festival of Love in Commemoration of Lord Gabriel and Lady Francette’s Marriage.”

“Mother and Gabriel aren’t great at this kind of thing, so we’ll have to come up with alternatives on our own,” I said. “Do you have any ideas?”

The triplets shifted nervously.

“Anything is fine,” I added. “It doesn’t even have to be a festival name. A theme would help too.”

Nico hesitantly raised her hand. “Um, I think you should choose something that will be loved by the people of Triste.”

“What about honoring something familiar to them?” Rico suggested.

Coco nodded in agreement. “I can paint a sign for the festival!”

“You don’t mind?” I asked.

“Not at all. Leave it to me.”

“Thank you. I’m so happy.”

Their ideas gave me something to work with: the festival should be named after something the locals loved and were familiar with that would also be easy for Coco to paint a sign for.

As I was thinking, Alexandrine, who was sitting on my lap, let out a “Quack!” Then it dawned on me: “What about a festival to thank the fowl knights for their service?” This was following the newly announced sightseeing tour of the

duck farm, so it would also make for good publicity.

Nico the animal lover clapped her hands together and said, "That's a wonderful idea, Lady Francette! The fowl knights will be delighted too."

Rico nodded in approval.

"Now, what should we do for the name?" I mused. "I suppose 'Fowl Knight Festival' wouldn't be original enough."

"No, I think a simple and straightforward name like that is best," said Rico.

Nico nodded in agreement.

Coco took out a pen and notebook and began drawing a rough sketch. "I'm thinking the sign will look like this, Lady Francette. What are your thoughts?" Her illustration showed a fowl knight in full plate armor wearing a dignified expression and holding a duck in his arms.

"It's perfect," I said. "Let's go with this. That said, we'll need approval from Gabriel and the mayor first. May I have this drawing, Coco? I'll use it to persuade them."

"Of course."

And so, the issue of the festival's name was likely solved. I wrote a letter to the mayor and entrusted it to Nico. I also had Rico deliver a summary of our festival ideas to Gabriel. Lastly, I asked Coco to buy materials for the signboard.

That was one problem taken care of, but there were still many things that had to be done before the wedding. As I was thinking about what to work on today, Constance brought me a pair of envelopes on a silver tray.

"Lady Francette, two letters from the Empire have arrived for you," she said.

"Thank you. You may leave."

Constance bowed respectfully and exited the room.

The letters were likely responses from my mother and sister, whose invitations I had given the highest priority. My sister was the crown princess of the Empire, and as such she had a busy schedule that extended years into the future. That was why I'd had to let her know well in advance. It had felt

awkward sending her an invitation when I hadn't been able to attend her wedding. She was a kind person, so I knew she wouldn't be angry with me, but I still couldn't help but fret about it.

I opened the letter from my mother first. It said, "I'll arrive at Triste one week before the wedding." The sentence made the blood drain from my face. I had expected her to come the day before or even on the day of. This was much earlier than anticipated. The period before the wedding would be very hectic, and I feared that her stay would be a burden on my mother-in-law. I doubted the two would get along particularly well. I would have to speak with my mother-in-law in advance.

I opened the other letter, which was from my sister. She congratulated me on my upcoming nuptials and wrote that she was looking forward to the wedding. She also mentioned when she would be coming to Triste. I had assumed it would be the day of, but just like my mother, she was also coming a week before. Not only that, but someone had informed her that I had been living in poverty in the old part of town, so she was asking why I hadn't asked for help. She also wrote that were I still living there now, she would have dragged me to the Empire against my will.

Who could have investigated my living conditions and reported them to my sister? I could only think of André, the attendant my mother had sent to take care of my father. He was a spy, so gathering information was his specialty. It was possible that he had asked my father about my life in the old part of town.

I should have silenced him. But more importantly, I can't believe they're coming to Triste early!

I was very happy to see my mother and sister again, of course. If my sister had married a nobleman in this country, I could have rejoiced without worry at the prospect of talking to her after so long. However, the circumstances surrounding us had changed drastically in the past few years.

Seeing my beloved sister and mother came with international complications. I couldn't welcome them casually as one normally would with one's family—not when they were the crown princess and the emperor's younger sister respectively. We would undoubtedly have important people coming to see

them from the royal capital. Prince Axel was fine, but there was a chance that other diplomats would come too. And my sister would probably pester me about my impoverished life in the old part of town. Just thinking about all of these issues made my head throb.

“Ugh...”

“Fra, are you okay?” Wibble peered at me worriedly and extended a tentacle to my forehead. *“You’re burning up.”*

“R-Really?” I told Wibble its hand felt cold and pleasant, and the slime pressed itself to my forehead. “My head feels a lot better now.”

“Wibble will keep Fra’s forehead nice and cool!”

“Thank you.” I have to pull myself together and write back to my mother and sister.

As I was rolling up my sleeves, Gabriel came in. “Francette, did you receive the letters from the Em...pire?” His eyes widened when he saw Wibble stuck to my forehead. “Wibble, what are you doing?!”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I asked Wibble to cool my head.”

“Do you have a fever?”

“No, that’s not it.”



Perhaps a short break was in order. I decided to invite Gabriel to chat over tea. Constance brewed a pot for us, and we shared it alongside a berry tart I'd baked last night. Since my head had cooled off, I thanked Wibble and placed it on my lap.

After enjoying the tea and tart, I explained the contents of the letters I'd received.

"And so, my mother and sister will be arriving a week before the wedding," I concluded.

"That's a surprise," Gabriel said. He seemed a bit uncomfortable, perhaps because he regretted not being able to attend my sister's wedding. "Meeting the Empire's crown princess is nerve-racking enough as it is. The fact that she's your older sister has me trembling with anxiety."

"She's a nice person, so you have nothing to worry about. Knowing her, she surely won't be harboring any hard feelings about our absence from her wedding either. But to be honest, I still feel guilty about not being able to attend."

"We couldn't have predicted there would be a storm on the day of our departure."

Incidentally, Gabriel's teleportation magic only worked for locations he had been to before. It wasn't an all-powerful spell.

"Once, when I was a student at the academy, I had an opportunity to study abroad in the Empire, but it was canceled a week before. My family found out that my father had absconded, and it was imperative I return to Triste from the capital. I still graduated after a temporary leave of absence, but I regret not studying abroad to this day, and missing your sister's wedding only further compounded that feeling. If only I'd gone through with it anyway..."

Magic was more widespread in the Empire than it was in our country, and their magical tools were more advanced.

"I wanted to become someone's apprentice there to benefit Triste's future development, but I suppose if I had studied in the Empire, I wouldn't have attended the soiree where I met you," Gabriel added.

“We’ll have to thank the whims of fate for that.”

“Indeed.”

Since we hadn’t been able to go to my sister’s wedding, we had discussed visiting the Empire afterwards to pay our respects. However, my mother-in-law had advised us to wait a little longer because the period after a wedding was often quite busy. I had felt obligated to at least go before inviting her to my own wedding, but I simply hadn’t had the time.

“It’s not just the fact that I missed my sister’s wedding that’s worrisome but also that she found out that I’d been living in poverty in the old part of town,” I said.

“You didn’t tell her?”

“I kept quiet about it.” My mother and sister had thought that I had been living with my father in an estate that was smaller than our previous mansion but still the size of a secondary residence. They never would have imagined that I had been living like a commoner. “Either way, I have to see them at some point, so I’ll prepare myself.”

“I will too.”

“For now, I should include a gift with my reply. What would be good? I’m thinking either one of your slime inventions or a tableware set made by the craftsmen at the porcelain workshop. Something that represents Triste.”

“I think you should send them your homemade sweets.”

“Are you sure? There are plenty of delicious sweets in the Empire. My sister probably receives piles of them every day.”

“I think your pastries are a symbol of the hard work you put in when you lived in the old part of town. If you talk to your sister about your experiences and emotions after leaving the life of nobility, I’m sure she’ll understand.”

“You might be right.” Perhaps the upset tone I sensed from her letter stemmed from the fact that I had hidden the truth from her. I had the feeling that if she knew I’d been living in the old part of town by choice, she wouldn’t criticize me. “I’ll send her my sweets and attempt to explain everything in my

letter.”

“Yes, I think that would be best.”

“Thank you, Gabriel. I’m glad I spoke with you.”

“I’m glad to have been of help.”

Without realizing it, I had probably stopped speaking with my sister because I didn’t want to bother her or make her worry, even though it was important for us to communicate our feelings.

“It’s strange that I would hesitate to talk to her when we grew up as family,” I mused.

“I understand how you feel. I used to hide all sorts of things from my mother because I didn’t want her to worry. But now, I consult with her about everything because you made me realize that I can rely on her more than I thought. And the more I talked to her, the more I wondered why I had avoided her for so long. I couldn’t believe how foolish I had been. Perhaps your relationship with your sister is similar. How do I say this? She’s your only sister in the world, so it’s a shame for there to be friction between you two.”

“You’re completely right.”

“I’m an only child, so I envy you for having a sister. What is it like to have a sibling?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure how to describe it. In my case, my older sister was a role model for me, so we probably weren’t the same as other sisters.”

I explained that my sister was a highly respectable lady—always noble and beautiful, never intimidated by adults. Normally, the royal family would marry royalty from other nations. Should a royal marry a mere noble, such a marriage would be morganatic. In our country’s long history, there hadn’t been a single case of a noblewoman assuming a royal title.

In my sister’s case, her overwhelmingly strong potential to be a capable queen had been recognized ever since she was a child. That was why she had been chosen as Prince Mael’s fiancée over princesses from other countries. Of course, our mother being a former imperial princess might have factored into

the decision, but it had probably been no more than an afterthought.

“Sometimes people ask me, ‘Wasn’t it hard to be compared to your brilliant sister?’ But our mindsets and the worlds we lived in were so different that I never once thought of putting myself in the same category as her.”

“I see. Siblings usually get compared to each other, don’t they?”

“It seems so.”

“If I had a brother or sister... I can’t even imagine it.”

“Oh, really?” I couldn’t help but see his conversations with Wibble as those of an older brother and younger sister. “I think you and Wibble are like real siblings.”

“Me and Wibble?”

“Yes. You’re like siblings or best friends.”

“If that’s how we appear, then as the older brother, I’ll have to act with more dignity.”

Wibble, who had been dozing off in my lap, opened its eyes and asked, “*What’s ‘dignity’?*”

“I was just talking about how I was going to show you that.”

“*Oh. Okay, go ahead.*”

It was a difficult request to handle out of the blue. Gabriel froze and coughed a few times.

“It’s not something you can do consciously, is it?” I asked.

“It really isn’t,” Gabriel said.

Wibble made a confused look and refilled Gabriel’s empty teacup. The discussion had gone far off track, but I felt better after consulting with Gabriel.

“For now, I’m going to bake sweets for my sister and write a letter expressing my honest feelings,” I said.

“I wish you the best,” Gabriel replied.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll be checking on the pearl cultivation at the lake. I think it’s going better than last time. The mussels have shiny surfaces, so they’re clearly in better condition.”

Maybe it’s okay to get my hopes up, I thought.

“Wibble, let’s go.”

“No! Wibble’s staying with Fra!”

“I knew you’d say that.” Gabriel heaved a sigh as he deployed his teleportation circle. “Don’t cause trouble for Fran, Wibble.”

“Wibble knows! Now go!”

“I can’t believe a tamed spirit is saying that,” he said with an exasperated look.

I waved to him and said, “Have a safe trip.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as Gabriel disappeared, I realized that I had been doing all of the talking in our discussion—I hadn’t had the mental leeway to listen to his troubles as well. Now that I’d confided in him my honest feelings, I felt refreshed. It was all thanks to Gabriel. He surely had his own worries too, so next time, it would be my turn to listen to him.

He probably won’t reveal them easily, but what matters is that I stay by his side and continue to support him.

I’d been focusing so much on work lately that I’d probably accumulated a lot of mental stress. Sometimes a change of pace was necessary.

“Maybe I should come up with something new for Adele.”

“Wibble will help!”

“Thank you. I’m counting on you.”

Wibble and I headed for the kitchen, filled with motivation.

Aside from the slime duke household’s main kitchen, there was another that Gabriel had installed just for me. Its white enameled countertops, bright-red

brick oven, and elegant oaken food racks were mounted above a marble floor. I personally thought it was the most beautiful kitchen in the world. It was here that I was going to make a certain sweet from my and my sister's past.

"Fra, what are you making today?" Wibble asked.

"Guimauves."

I explained that years ago, my sister and I had made them at an orphanage. I had been seven or eight years old at the time—the age when I'd toddled after her like a duckling. When I tried to follow her on outings, my attendant had usually scolded me, but that day, my sister had given me permission to accompany her.

Our destination had been the orphanage where my sister had volunteered once a week. Residing within had been around fifty children, ranging from infants to teens. During our visit, my sister had completed the cleaning and laundry with practiced motions, but it'd been my first time tending to such chores. I remembered complaining incessantly about how the broom was too heavy and the well water too cold. Each time, my sister had gently reminded me, "This is what it's like for the maids who work at our mansion."

After finishing her tasks, my sister would typically make sweets—not for the children but for the church next to the orphanage. In exchange for her giving them sweets to sell, they would donate to the orphanage, and the money would be used to support the children.

That day, my sister had said she was going to make guimauves. They were one of the most popular sweets at the church, said to sell out in less than an hour. According to the nuns, the ones made by my sister were especially delicious and ran out the fastest.

I had wanted to try making them too, so my sister had offered to teach me. However, my guimauves had ended up a goopy mess. To put it plainly, they had been a total failure.

My sister had seen me looking depressed and said, "No one gets it right on their first try." She had even gone on to confess, "My first sweets were a disaster too."

I couldn't believe that my perfect sister could fail at doing something. But a nun had corroborated her words, sharing her account of how difficult it had been to get my sister, who had been eight years old at the time, to stop sobbing.

"A swan swimming in a lake may look graceful, but beneath the surface of the water, it's paddling with all its might," my sister had said. "Likewise, I believe that hard work is not something that we flaunt to others." She hadn't even been ten years old at the time—how had she been able to elucidate her thoughts so philosophically? I couldn't help but wonder. Still, that was how I had learned that my sister, who had seemed far removed from failures and setbacks, had actually been putting in quite the earnest effort behind the scenes.

After that, I'd started going to the orphanage with my sister regularly. I learned how to clean, cook, and do laundry. But I was never able to make better guimauves than her. Some years had passed since then, and my cooking skills had improved. Surely I could make delicious guimauves now.

Incidentally, this would be my first time attempting them since I was a child. Despite selling so many sweets in the past few years, I had avoided making guimauves, partially because I had been afraid of failure. But now, I understood what I had done incorrectly back then, and the recipe had been drilled into my head, so I could easily recall it.

"This time, I'll succeed," I said, mainly to myself. "I'm going to make guimauves!"

"Yeah!"

After pumping myself up by high-fiving Wibble, I got started on the nostalgic sweets. I wanted to convey some of Triste's many merits through them, so I planned on mixing in the berry puree I'd made with Wibble the other day, as well as slime gelatin, a powdered product invented by Gabriel that had been purified for cooking use. Just last month, the Lakeside Duck Bakery had begun using it in jellies and custards.

"First, dissolve the slime gelatin in water and mix well," I instructed Wibble.

"Leave it to Wibble!" The slime skillfully picked up the whisk and whirled it

around in the bowl.

Next, I added milk, sugar, syrup, and the berry puree to a saucepan and heated it on the stove. When the outer edges began to bubble, I poured the mixture into the bowl of slime gelatin and stirred quickly with a whisk. This was the step where I had failed previously. Had I asked Wibble to do this, I knew it would've been able to pull it off with ease, but this was something I wanted to do myself.

"Wibble, I'm going to try my best. Can you watch me?"

"Of course!"

After whisking the mixture until it was light and fluffy, I added vanilla-flavored oil and gently folded it in. Then, I poured the mixture into a mold that had been lightly coated in oil and flour. Once the guimauves reached room temperature, they would be ready to eat.

"It went well, Wibble!"

"Yay!"

I had finished making the sweets I had unconsciously avoided for years. Needless to say, I felt extremely relieved. However, I couldn't call it a success yet—what mattered most was the taste and texture.

I nervously tried one of the guimauves. As I bit into the soft, springy treat, the sweet and tart taste of berries spread through my mouth. It was a refreshing, delicious flavor.

"I was able to make guimauves with your support, Wibble."

"That's great!"

I teared up from joy, and Wibble gently hugged me. I knew I would be able to send these guimauves to my sister with confidence.

After dinner, Gabriel and I had tea, and I served him my guimauves.

"I made these as a gift for Adele," I explained. "Can you try them for me?"

"Gladly," he replied.

I mentioned that I had used autumn-berry puree and slime gelatin. As soon as he picked one up, he looked surprised.

“Is something wrong?” I asked.

“No, it’s just that I’ve never had such a soft guimauve before.”

That was understandable. Unlike regular guimauves, the ones I’d learned how to make at the orphanage were fluffier than normal and jiggled a bit, like slimes. They also had a springy texture.

“That’s because of the recipe I use, but the slime gelatin might be making them even softer than normal,” I said.

“I see.”

Slime gelatin was flavorless and odorless, so it didn’t interfere with the sweets’ taste. It would surely be popular if it were sold on the market.

“With this, I suppose slime gelatin is even making its way to the Empire,” Gabriel said.

“Yes, that’s right.”

When Gabriel had first told me about his idea for slime gelatin, he had said that it probably wouldn’t be found acceptable. After all, the consumption of monsters was forbidden. However, the slime gelatin Gabriel had produced was properly purified, and only the gelatinous substance had been extracted from slimes. He had submitted a commercial-product application to the government through Prince Axel, and it had passed safety inspections. The sweets made with it were very popular at the Lakeside Duck Bakery.

“I’ll be sure to explain my use of slime gelatin in my letter, so it’ll be fine,” I said.

“That’s a relief.”

I anxiously watched as Gabriel lifted the guimauve to his mouth.

“I’ll go ahead and try it, then,” he said.

“Please do.”

His eyes widened in surprise the moment the sweet passed his lips. After

chewing several times, he swallowed.

“Fran, these are the most delicious guimauves in the world!”

“Really?”

“Yes, I’m not lying!”

I was relieved to have his seal of approval.

“You should sell them at the Lakeside Duck Bakery,” he said. “They’ll surely be popular!”

“Shall I have the workers taste test them too, then?”

“Absolutely!”

Thanks to Gabriel, I was positive that my sister would love the guimauves. But that was enough about me—I wanted to know how things had gone at the lake.

“How were the pearls?” I asked.

“Oh, right. I was going to tell you.” He took a bundled handkerchief out of his chest pocket. “The next set of pearls had fully developed, so I extracted them to check.”

He unwrapped the handkerchief. I expected him to reveal beautiful pearls, but I was sadly wrong. Instead, the beads’ nacreous coatings were speckled and their shapes warped.

“Unfortunately, it didn’t work this time either,” Gabriel said.

“What could’ve gone wrong?”

“This is merely conjecture at this point, but I think the cores may have been the problem.” The cores we’d inserted into the mussels had been made from the oysters Emilie had sent us from the ogre duke’s territory. “I suspect that they weren’t compatible with, say, the mana contained within the mussels or the lake’s qualities, so the nacreous layer didn’t function as expected.”

“Would it be better for the cores to be made out of something native to Triste, then?”

“That was the conclusion I came to as well.”

In the ogre duke's territory, cores were made from large shellfish. Triste didn't have anything similar.

"For now, I'm thinking of using round cores made of powdered freshwater black mussels," Gabriel continued. "I already made a prototype, and I'm going to try it tomorrow. When I first heard about the ogre duke's aquaculture method, I thought it'd be easy, but it really isn't working out well at all."

"That's not true. I think you're making good progress, one step at a time."

If we couldn't perfect the pearls in time for the wedding, I could just decorate my wedding dress with Gabriel's slime crystals. They'd definitely look beautiful too.

He seemed to have lost a bit of confidence, so I held his hand and said, "I know you can do it."

"Thank you, Fran." His eyes lit up, and I knew he would be fine.

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Can you help me look for a suitable core material?"

"Of course!"

"I don't expect the ones made from freshwater black mussels to work, because pearls are the product of a self-defense mechanism in response to a foreign object. The mana is also a factor, so it's not a matter of inserting any perfectly round entity."

"Do you have anything else in mind?"

"I'm thinking something from the same lake. Perhaps stones, crustacean shells, or mud."

"Something from the lake... That'll be tricky."

"There are only so many hard materials you can find in the water. Fortunately, I've developed a spell to speed up the mussels' recovery time. With that, they won't need a rest period of several months. We can continue experimenting without burdening the mussels."

"Please don't overwork yourself, Gabriel."

“I won’t. If I pushed myself too far and collapsed, I’d make you worry.”

We hugged each other and promised to make sure we’d prioritize our health.

My mother-in-law told me she wanted to speak with me when I had time. It was the first time she’d ever made such a request, and I couldn’t imagine what would prompt this, so I set aside time for it that same day.

“Miss Francette, are you sure?” she asked. “Aren’t you busy today?”

“I’ve finished the work that needed to be done.”

“I-I see.” Restless, my mother-in-law continued drinking her tea and let out a deep sigh. “Um, it’s almost Julietta’s birthday, and I’m thinking of getting her a present.”

“Oh, that’s wonderful! I’m sure she’ll be elated.”

“R-Really?”

“Of course.” I nodded firmly.

“Since she wed, I have never once given her a gift. It feels like it’s too late now.”

“That’s not true.” I shook my head. I could imagine Mrs. Molière jumping for joy upon receiving a present from my mother-in-law.

“What do you think would make her happy, Miss Francette?”

“Hmm...” She would probably love anything that my mother-in-law specially picked out for her, but we wouldn’t be having this conversation right now if my mother-in-law had been able to decide on something. So, I decided to give her some specific advice. “Mrs. Molière likes glamorous things, so how about asking a porcelain craftsman to make a tea set with violets on it?”

“I would’ve never thought of that. I’m sure Julietta would love that. I’ll order it right now. Thank you, Miss Francette!”

“I’m glad I could be of help.”

It was good to see my mother-in-law looking cheerful again.



A few days later, the next set of pearls was removed from the mussels. The cores made from freshwater black mussels had not produced good results. Expecting this, Gabriel had already prepared cores made from other materials. I had tried making one out of fish bones as well. All I could do otherwise was pray to God for success.

The transforming slime had begun to see itself as the master of the lake and was cooperating with the pearl cultivation. When Gabriel arrived, it would lift the net containing the mussels onto shore. It had also learned how to extract the pearls without harming the mollusks. Upon seeing that, Gabriel had realized that if he could get slimes to insert and remove the pearls, it could completely avoid the burden normally inflicted on the mussels. Using slimes for pearl cultivation would be much more effective.

“At first, I was thinking of hiring people from the village to do the job,” he explained. “But since it was the ogre duke family who developed the cultivation technique, I don’t think the knowledge should be spread across Triste. After some thought, I decided to borrow the help of slimes. I selected slimes that were relatively dexterous, tamed them, and taught them the technique. As a result, the experiments will be more efficient now.”

“What an amazing idea, Gabriel!”

“Thank you. However, the project itself hasn’t yielded any good results yet...”

All of the cores had failed thus far, including my fish-bone one. None of them had been coated in the beautiful nacreous layer we were looking for. As Gabriel had said before, the reason was probably an incompatibility between the mussels and the mana in the core.

“What else can we do?” he mused. The experiments had come to a standstill, and he was at his wit’s end. “For now, let’s look for something outside the lake that could be used as a core.”

“That’s a good idea. I doubt any piece of stone lying on the ground will work, though. Maybe it has to be a special item that can only be found in Triste.”

“Only here?”

“Yes. I’m sure something like that would be a good match manawise. What

about the slate that's used for the roofs in this region?"

"Slate absorbs water, so it would need to be waterproofed. I can apply the same slime paint that the roofs use."

Gabriel immediately got to work. There were a large number of tamed slimes at the pearl-cultivation lake, trained in a variety of roles. There were slimes to look after the mussels, slimes that were skilled at inserting cores, slimes that specialized in extracting pearls, and slimes to provide medical care, among others.

Gabriel called for a material-processing slime, and it bounced up to us. It took the slate into its mouth, turned it into perfect spheres within its body, and spit them out.

"We're going to make three of these prototypes," Gabriel instructed. As soon as he said that, the other slimes came over, took the cores, and started inserting them into the shells. "Now we just have to wait three to seven days."

"Right." I prayed for success as I watched the net of mussels disappear into the lake.

"This time for sure!" Gabriel muttered under his breath.

Sensing his impatience, I gently wrapped my arms around him from behind.

"Fran?"

"Even if the pearls don't go the way we want, please don't torment yourself over them."

"I know. I really want to see you wearing Triste's pearls at our wedding ceremony, though."

It wasn't my place to deny that desire of his, but at this rate, I was becoming increasingly concerned about what might happen if he drove himself into a corner.

"I'm happy just being able to marry you," I said. "In fact, I'm happy enough to not need a ceremony at all, let alone the dress. So please don't worry yourself over making it in time for the wedding. That's my only wish."

"Thank you, Fran." He looked back at me and smiled. The shadow hanging

over his expression was gone, and there was a faint light in his eyes.

In the end, the slate cores also failed. However, Gabriel didn't seem as depressed as before. He was optimistic about the next trial.

None of the experiments thus far had succeeded in producing pearls. The words "give up" appeared at the edge of my thoughts, but I shook my head. If there was anyone who had to keep faith no matter what, it was me. Even if we couldn't make it in time for the wedding, Triste was capable of cultivating pearls. I kept that hope in my heart as the trials continued.



Winter came quickly, and soon there were only four months until our spring wedding. Needless to say, we were still without pearls. The other day, we had tried using Triste's kaolin, but it had failed too. Gabriel hadn't admitted defeat, but my mother-in-law was tired of waiting. She wanted to start decorating my wedding dress.

"Mother, we're almost there," Gabriel insisted.

"You say that, but it's been months!"

Sparks flew as mother and son glared at each other.

"No fighting, you two!" Wibble intervened, but neither side was willing to listen. *"Fighting won't get you anywhere! It's unproductive!"*

"You're completely right, Wibble," I said.

"See?!"

I stepped between Gabriel and my mother-in-law and urged them to reconcile.

"Don't stop me, Miss Francette!" my mother-in-law exclaimed. "When this boy is fixed on something, he won't give up until he gets results, no matter how long it takes."

"That may be true, but this time the research is for Fran!" Gabriel argued. "Well, I suppose that's not exactly right. It's for my desperate desire to see Fran in a wedding dress adorned with pearls. I refuse to stop when I've already come this far!"

Neither side was backing down. I had no choice but to propose a compromise.

“Let’s make the next trial the last one, then. If it fails, we’ll decorate the dress with slime crystals. Does that work?” I asked, the smile on my face pressuring them not to complain.

Gabriel and my mother-in-law nodded. I was relieved that they understood.

My mother-in-law pointed the end of her fan at Gabriel and declared, “You only have one more chance!” before leaving the room.

The door closed behind her with a *clunk*. Beginning to apologize, Gabriel said, “Fran, I’m sorry you had to see that unsightly display. I was just defending my opinion, and before I knew it, we’d gotten into a fight.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “Arguing with a loved one is a way of understanding one another better, and it’s something not everyone can do.”

I’d never seen my family fight before. My mother hadn’t expected anything of my father and had turned a blind eye to everything he did. For his part, my father hadn’t cared about the family either. He’d left my and my sister’s upbringing to my mother, spending most of his time at his mistress’s villa and coming home sparingly, perhaps every few months. During my childhood, he’d probably had no knowledge of my activities.

My sister had been perfect and had never done anything that would’ve gotten her scolded. She had been the very picture of an honor student. As for me, I had been rather rowdy as a child. My nanny and attendant had mainly taken care of me, so most of the scolding I’d received had come from them.

“Rather, having no interest in your family would mean you’d never get angry with them to start with,” I said. “Fighting means that you care.”

“You may be right.”

However, things could become uncomfortable if they went too far while emotions were running high. As family members living in the same house, they needed to strike a compromise before the argument reached that point.

“If you hadn’t intervened, we would’ve kept arguing until we were essentially living separately in the same house,” Gabriel said.

“What does that mean?”

“There were times when, despite residing under the same roof, we didn’t talk to each other for about half a year. After my father left Triste, causing me to return from the capital, my mother and I fought a lot. I think that was when our relationship was at its worst.”

Gabriel had been forced to inherit the dukedom when his father absconded. The unexpected situation must have been mentally taxing on him and his mother.

“I was enrolled in the academy at the time, and I wanted to graduate first, but my mother insisted that I come back. I was upset about everything and lashed out at her for no good reason.”

“It must’ve been a difficult time.”

“Indeed, it was. That was definitely my rebellious phase. The problem was that my mother had been just as emotionally distraught as me. It is rather bizarre that she vented her anger in the same manner as her teenage son.”

“I’m sure she was just having her rebellious phase too.”

“It came awfully late for her, then. But perhaps because we were equally impassioned, we both felt sorry and never broke ties completely. I’m now grateful to my mother for fighting with me when I didn’t know how else to let off steam.”

Listening to Gabriel’s story, I couldn’t help but wonder if my sister would be angry with me. She had sent me many letters asking me to come to the Empire, but I had ignored them and continued to live in the old part of town. I’d never seen her have an emotional outburst before. Even when Prince Mael had broken off their engagement, she had handled the situation with the utmost calm, as if she had known it was going to happen.

When we meet again, she might ask me with a straight face why I didn’t listen to her. What am I to her? She must think I’m impossible to understand.

I found myself feeling slightly jealous of Gabriel, who was able to argue with his family. But this was not the time to dwell on that.

“Anyway, I’m sorry for deciding that the next trial would be the last, Gabriel,” I said.

“No, it’s fine. I’ve already run out of ideas, so I probably only would’ve been able to do one or two more either way.”

Pearl cultivation really was difficult. I never would’ve dreamed that we would struggle with it for so long. Emilie had visited Triste several more times since the day she had delivered the water sample, but we still hadn’t been able to find a solution. Though we’d trialed all sorts of hard materials that could only be found in Triste, the beautiful pearls were nowhere to be seen.

As if reflecting our emotions, rain began to fall from the sky. It started off as a drizzle but quickly grew in intensity.

“Even the weather is getting worse,” Gabriel said. “Now I know I’m unlucky.”

“It’s been raining a lot lately even though it’s not the rainy season,” I remarked.

“Indeed.”

The downpour was probably causing an increase in slime activity. I could only pray that they wouldn’t startle the tourists. Thankfully, the pearl-cultivation lake was being protected by Gabriel’s tamed slimes, so it would be fine.

“Still, I don’t know what else to use as a core at this point,” Gabriel mused. “Monster fangs, turtle shells, livestock horns, eggshells... I’ve run out of ideas.”

“The attempt with slime crystals didn’t go well either, so I don’t think there are any other hard materials we can—”

Suddenly, there was a flash of light outside, followed by the loud roar of thunder.

“This lightning storm might cull some of the slimes in the area,” Gabriel said.

“Oh, that’s right. Slimes are weak to lightning.”

Slimes hardened when they were hit by lightning attacks, and if you continued to attack them, they would die in that state. It was a mysterious trait that Gabriel had tried to find a use for, but—

“Oh!” I exclaimed.

“What is the matter, Fran?”

“Gabriel, there *is* something we can use for the core!”

“Wh-What is it?”

“Hardened slimes that were killed by lightning!”

“Oh!” Gabriel exclaimed, perfectly echoing my prior realization. “That never once occurred to me. I think it’s worth a try.”

“Thank goodness.” I didn’t know what I would’ve done if he’d said they were out of the question.

“They can’t be used as is, but if I drain a bit of their mana and purify them, it should be fine.”

Gabriel stood up, ready to get started. He scooped Wibble under his arm and left the room.

At this point, there was probably nothing I could do but trust in him.



The next day, I accompanied Gabriel to the pearl-cultivation lake. The slimes were hard at work, shaping the core material into perfect spheres and inserting them into the mussels. They then lined the mollusks up in the net and lowered them into the lake, which had been infused with powdered magicite.

All of the work was done by slimes, with no human labor involved. It seemed that they were able to do everything on their own, even without Gabriel’s instruction. *They’re so smart*, I thought to myself.

It had already been three months since the pearl cultivation project began. I hadn’t expected it to be easy, but it had ended up being much more difficult than anticipated. I felt a little glum at the thought that this would be our last attempt. Gabriel likely felt the same, judging by the conflicted look on his face as he gazed at the lake.

“There’s still time,” he said.

“Any more than this would be pushing it,” I replied. “The closer we get to the

wedding, the busier we'll be."

"I...suppose you're right." His shoulders slumped.

I gently took his hands in mine. "You know, Gabriel, for some reason, I feel like this one will succeed."

"Really? I don't feel like that at all."

"I don't have any scientific basis for it. If I had to give a reason, perhaps it's because this is Triste, the slime duke's territory."

"None of the previous attempts using slimes worked, though."

"That's true. But I have faith." For once, I wasn't going to pray to God. I was fully confident that we would produce beautiful pearls. "Whenever I have a hunch like this, it usually pans out."

"I see. Well, I can believe in anything if it's coming from you." Confidence gradually spread over his features. "Fran, let's check on the pearls together in three days."

"Yes! I can't wait."

The weather later that day was unusually nice for Triste. I couldn't help but think that it was promising us a bright future.

Three days later, the results of the final experiment were waiting for us. Gabriel and I stood in front of the window, looking at the scenery outside.

"It's...absolutely pouring," he said.

"So it is."

Three days ago, the skies had been clear, and I had rejoiced for our bright future. But today, it was raining cats and dogs.

"Fran, winter rains can easily make one sick," Gabriel said. "Shall we leave it for tomorrow?"

"No, I want to see the pearls...or so I'd say, but I also don't want you to catch a cold."

"I'll be fine. I'm stronger than I look. If you want to see the pearls, we can go."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, but you’ll have to wear the warmest and most waterproof clothes possible.”

“Understood.”

I figured I would wear several cloaks layered upon each other with a raincoat on top, but Gabriel’s suggested countermeasure was completely unexpected.

“Firstly... On days like this, the ground is muddy and slippery. It will be even more treacherous in a dress. So, pants are a must for your own safety,” he said.

“Do you have any?”

“Yes. Not long ago, mother invited me to go hunting with her, so I had a set of clothes made.”

Gabriel was taken aback. “Why in the world would she do that? I’ve never seen her show interest in hunting before.”

“Apparently, hunting with guns is the current fad among women in the capital. The game they catch is turned into coats.”

“What a dangerous trend.”

My mother-in-law probably wasn’t interested in the hunting itself—she just wanted to do what her younger sister in the capital, Mrs. Molière, had impressed upon her.

“Anyway, since you have pants, next is this.” Gabriel held out a red slime. “Have it transform into a coat for you to wear. It has fire properties, so it will warm you through, even on the coldest winter days.”

“Oh, similar to how Wibble heats itself up.”

“Wibble? When did it do that?”

“When I was living in the old part of town, there were nights when it was too cold to fall asleep. Wibble kept me warm.”

Gabriel whipped his head around to look at the slime in question. “Wibble, you can do that?”

“Yup! Wibble just never did it for you.”

“And you slept with Fran?!”

“Heh heh! Aren’t you jealous?”

“Oh, I’m *extremely*— Erm, never mind.” Gabriel pushed the bridge of his glasses up as he ordered Wibble to transform into a scarf for me. “Lastly, take this.” He held out a blue slime. “All slimes are waterproof, but this light-blue one is especially so. It can transform into a raincoat that won’t let a single drop of water through. Next, I’ll grab a nearby tamed slime and have it turn into an umbrella. You should be safe from the cold and rain with all of these.”

“Gabriel, you’re going to take the same measures for yourself, right?”

“Of course!”

“But if you catch a cold, Fran will take care of you!”

“That does sound very tempting! I could catch a cold now and— I mean, how could you say that, Wibble?!”

Apparently, Gabriel wanted me to nurse him back to health. I certainly didn’t want him to catch a cold just for that. “Look, I can play nurse with you whenever you want, so don’t get sick on purpose, okay?”

“P-Play nurse?!” he repeated.

His excessive reaction was making me embarrassed. I blamed Wibble for my weird offer. “Forget what I just said.”

“No, I don’t think I can.”

We didn’t have time for this headache-inducing conversation. We had to get ready and check on the pearls.

“I’ll meet up with you in an hour,” I said. “Is that okay?”

“Will an hour be enough time?”

“Of course.”

And so, we split up to get changed. Nico, Coco, and Rico helped me. To no one’s surprise, Alexandrine didn’t want to go to the lake with us on such a stormy day. Instead, she quacked as if to say, “Have a safe trip.”

I had my hair tied up tightly so that it wouldn’t get in the way. The pants

made me feel a bit uneasy since I wasn't used to wearing them. It was embarrassing having the outlines of my legs visible for all to see.

When I was done, the slimes gathered around me. The red slime turned into a coat, Wibble turned into a scarf, and the blue slime transformed into a translucent raincoat. If I pulled the hood low over my face, I wouldn't have to worry about getting wet in the rain.

It took just about an hour to finish my preparations. I regrouped with Gabriel and found him dressed in a similar outfit.

"Fran, I'm going to teleport us directly to the lake, so please hold this slime umbrella," he said.

"Thank you." I opened the umbrella and held it above my head.

"All right, let's go."

"Yes."

Beneath our feet, a magic circle appeared, engulfing us in bright light. The scenery spun around us, and we arrived at the pearl-cultivation lake amid a downpour that could topple buckets over.

"The rain is worse than I thought," Gabriel said.

"It really is."

But as planned, my slime umbrella and raincoat repelled the deluge, and even though it was winter, I didn't feel the slightest bit cold.

"Fran, are you okay?"

"Yes, thanks to the slimes."

"That's good."

We decided to quickly check the pearls and go home right after. When Gabriel raised his hand, the transforming slime in the lake poked its head out in response.

"Can you bring out the net?" Gabriel asked.

"Okaaay!"

The slime quickly raised the net and deposited it on the ground. As I crouched down near the lake, other slimes came up to me and transformed into a roof over my head.

“Oh my, thank you,” I said. “I really appreciate it.”

The slimes wobbled in response.

In the meantime, Gabriel had ordered a slime to extract the pearls. The slimes here had mastered the art of doing so without harming the mussels. They didn’t even need to use the magical extraction fluid.

I watched nervously as the slime began.

“Open it up aaand...” It gently inserted its tentacle into the shell, and its body quivered upon grabbing the pearl. *“Take it ouuut!”* Slowly, it pulled its tentacle out, revealing a perfectly spherical pearl.

“Oh!” I exclaimed.

“It can’t be!” Gabriel shouted in disbelief.

At long last, the pearl we wished for was right before our eyes. The slime gingerly deposited the fruit of our labor in the palm of Gabriel’s hand. The pearl had a smooth shine, like fresh cream, and although our surroundings were dark and dreary from the rain, it seemed to have a faint glow.

“Is this what a Triste pearl looks like?” Gabriel mused.

“It’s lovely,” I said.

It didn’t have the glamorous, iridescent colors of the ogre duke’s territory’s aurora pearls, but it was a perfect, pure white, reminiscent of a wedding gown.

“Gabriel, this pearl is beautiful, just like your hair.”

“My hair?”

“Yes! I love it.”

With tears in his eyes, Gabriel looked between me and the pearl. “You don’t know how much I’ve dreamed of seeing your smile next to our completed pearls.”

“Thank you, Gabriel.” I hugged him with all my might, and the pearl in his

hand went flying. Luckily, Wibble stretched out a tentacle and caught it. “S-Sorry. I was just overcome with happiness.”

“Don’t worry. We can make as many pearls as we want now.”

We checked the other mussels, and they had produced beautiful pearls as well. Our hard work had finally paid off.

“Fran, have you thought of a name for the pearls?” Gabriel asked.



“Are you sure it should be me naming them?”

“Of course. It has to be you.”

These were Triste’s own pearls, different from aurora pearls. I wanted to give them a name that was close to home.

“I thought about it a bit,” I said. “How about ‘lake pearls’?”

“I like that. It’s a wonderful name.”

At his words, relief passed over me.

“Fran, please make a beautiful wedding dress with the lake pearls.”

“I will. You can look forward to it.”

It was Gabriel who initiated our next hug. My chest filled with warmth, and tears welled up in my eyes.

I must be the happiest bride-to-be in the world.

Chapter 3: The Noble Lady Francette Is Busy as a Bee

The pearl cultivation was a great success. However, whether or not the ogre duke would be able to apply the same methodology was the question. Emilie had reassured us, saying that Gabriel had already helped more than enough by inventing a special formula for powdered magicite and a recovery spell for the mollusks. Now, the entire ogre duke family was going to work towards reviving the aurora pearls.

Emilie said that if her cultivation was successful, she would use some of the pearls to make me a parure—a set of matching jewelry. We also promised that one day we would wear aurora pearls to a soiree together.

The ogre duke family had also determined that if we released lake pearls into the market, they probably wouldn't pose a threat to aurora pearls as direct competition. They had gathered just to discuss the matter. Some members had been against Triste's production of pearls, but Emilie had forced them to yield. I had been concerned when I'd heard about this, but then again, Emilie *was* the ogre duke. No one was going to defy the head of the family.

Gabriel said that we'd keep lake pearl production slow for a while. If Triste made too many at once, the product would flood the market and decrease in value. So for the time being, they would be sold as limited releases. Either way, it was thrilling to have a new local specialty. Eventually, we could open a jewelry workshop and store, and sell the pearls alongside slime crystals.



The pearl cultivation project hadn't been requiring my immediate attention, so I had taken the time to make a fresh set of guimauves and had them sent to my sister. I was nervous about whether or not she would eat them. To my surprise, her reply was almost immediate.

With her guimauves, I had also enclosed a letter revealing the details of my life in the old part of town. To be honest, I was feeling apprehensive regarding her reaction. Despite having exchanged numerous letters with her before, this

was my first time filled with such anxiety over opening one.

Wibble seemed to sense my nervousness. The noble slime cheered, “*You can do it, Fran. Wibble is here for you!*”

“Thank you, Wibble.”

I set the letter on the table for a moment and settled my hand on my chest. After taking a few deep breaths, I picked up the paper knife, steeled my resolve, and cut through the seal.

My sister’s letters were always efficient and to the point. She typically stated everything she needed to say within one sheet of paper. However, today’s envelope was unusually thick. The message within it spanned five pages.

Wibble leaned in close to reassure me. Even Alexandrine, who wasn’t one for shows of affection, came to rest by me. *I’m not alone. I have companions by my side*, I thought as I began to read.

The letter began with a thank-you for the guimauves. My sister had been surprised to find out that they were made with slimes, but when she’d tried them, she’d thought they were delicious. My moment of relief only lasted until the next sentence—apparently, she had shared my guimauves with the crown prince as well. I couldn’t believe that a *future emperor* had eaten my sweets. Fortunately, he had praised them too.

In addition to the guimauves, I’d also sent her various slime-based products that Gabriel had invented, and she seemed to like them all. I had been confident in those, so I found myself proudly thinking, *Of course you do*.

After that, she’d written that she was looking forward to visiting Triste. She also wanted to see the field of sweet violets. Since the wedding was in early spring, there was a high chance of rain. I was concerned about the weather, but at the same time, I felt that Triste was beautiful during such showers—it was one of the region’s charms. I hoped my sister would enjoy this land for what it was.

Everything she’d written until this point had been contained within the first sheet of her message. Her efficiency never failed to impress me. The problem was what came next. The remaining four pages were probably her thoughts on

my life in that one-story house in the old part of town.

I nervously shuffled the sheets to the next page. The first line read, “Thank you for confiding in me.” I had expected a scolding right off the bat, so this caught me off guard. However, as I’d feared, the next line said, “If that was the case, why didn’t you tell me from the start?!” It was unusual for her to lay her feelings bare like that.

Apparently, if I had said that I wanted to live in the old part of town, she would have fully respected my wish. But if our father had left me there to fend for myself with nothing to eat, that was a different story. She wrote that she would have cast everything aside to help me and that she wished she could have hugged me and praised me for enduring for so long.

The moment I read that, tears spilled from my eyes. I had thought that my sister only saw me as a blood relative—that she didn’t have any feelings for me beyond that basic recognition. I’d had no idea that she loved me enough to write what she had.

My sister admitted that as the future empress, she wasn’t supposed to be willing to abandon her people for me. She hadn’t accepted her marriage to the Empire’s crown prince half-heartedly, but at the same time, she had known that her engagement could be broken again. So when the offer for her hand had been made, she had declared to the crown prince that if anything were to happen to her family, she would rush to their aid, even if it meant giving up her position as crown princess. The aftermath of her broken engagement to Prince Mael must have affected her deeply.

My sister had also written that it pained her that our family had suffered because of her. Reading what I had gone through, she had felt that she should’ve dragged me to the Empire even if I hadn’t wanted to go, but she had also realized that I would’ve been too stubborn to listen to her.

Her letter concluded with the words: “I’m sure the hardships you endured led to the happiness you have now. When I think about how much you suffered, I can’t honestly say that it was for the best, but I’m proud of you for persevering and continuing to work hard without envying or resenting others.”

My heart was filled with a sudden surge of emotion, and I found myself

sobbing. I'd never dreamed that my sister would recognize my efforts. All of the awkwardness and negative thoughts that had been rooted in my mind dissipated.

I was crying so much that Wibble felt the need to wipe my cheeks with a handkerchief.

"Thank you, Wibble. This is embarrassing."

"It's good to cry once in a while."

I giggled. "You're right."

Alexandrine plunked herself onto my lap and held out her head as if to say, "You can pet me if you want." Thanks to her and Wibble, I was able to stop crying immediately.

That night, I told Gabriel that I had received a reply from my sister. "There's no need to worry anymore. Adele understands my past situation now."

"That's great to hear," Gabriel said, looking relieved. He had been worried about her response too.

It would've been nice to end the conversation on that high note, but it turned out that Gabriel had also received a letter from the Empire that day.

"It said something that I frankly cannot believe," he said.

"What was it?"

"The Empire is requesting to send a group of diplomats to Triste at the same time as your sister's visit."

"Oh my!"

There wasn't much in the way of diplomatic relations between our country and the Empire. We received some minor preferential treatment since my mother had formerly been an imperial princess, but our nations weren't exactly allies. The last instance of diplomatic negotiations had been a few years ago, but even then, it hadn't particularly brought our countries closer together.

"Is this because Adele is attending our wedding?" I asked.

“I imagine so.”

Naturally, it wasn't that the Empire wished to speak with Gabriel himself—they were proposing a meeting at the country level.

“That's amazing,” I said.

“It's all thanks to you, Fran.”

“I didn't do anything at all.”

“No, this wouldn't have happened without you.” Gabriel explained that there was probably going to be an international conference held in Triste, with our country's diplomats in attendance as well. “To be honest, it feels too grand for this region, so I'm tempted to suggest holding it in the capital instead. However, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make people take note of our presence.”

If Triste became a venue for an international conference, it would surely improve our standing within the country. Gabriel wasn't skilled at hosting such events, but he seemed to be prepared to try his best for the sake of developing his territory.

“Will you help me, Fran?” he asked.

“Of course!” I squeezed his hand and nodded.

He smiled softly, the tension fading from his features.

“It's probably going to be difficult, since we also have to prepare for the wedding and reception,” I mused.

“There's the Fowl Knight Festival too.”

“Right.”

The Lakeside Duck Bakery was going to have a stall at the festival too, with the main attraction being the special guimauves I had come up with for my sister. This time, they would be made with sweet-violet extract. When one ate this version of my guimauves, the flowers' elegant fragrance pleasantly permeated one's nose. The product had been a big hit at a tasting event we'd held for tourists. And the standard berry flavor would be available too, of course. The guimauves would all be made with slime gelatin, just like in my

original recipe. We planned to sell them in baskets woven from tree bark.

Other merchants were also permitted to set up stalls as long as their documents were in order and no issues were found with the items they were selling.

The Fowl Knight Festival was on track to become the largest festival in Triste, spanning five days. We'd decided to make it longer in order to spread out the anticipated influx of tourists. We were already expecting a flood of attendees, with lodging and wyvern flights fully booked for the length of the event.

"With the international conference a week before the wedding as well, turnout will be huge," said Gabriel.

"Indeed." An unprecedented number of people would be coming to Triste. There was bound to be trouble. "I don't know if the security guards will be enough to handle the crowds."

"I consulted with Prince Axel and asked him to dispatch a team of knights," said Gabriel. "You don't need to worry about a thing, Fran. It's our wedding, so it will absolutely go off without a hitch."

"You're right. I have no doubt that it will."

It was rare for Gabriel to be so optimistic. I'd never imagined the day would come when he would be the one reassuring me instead of the other way around.

"Is something the matter, Fran?" he asked.

"No, I was just thinking that this is the opposite of the usual. I'm the pessimistic one, and you're the optimistic one."

"It's thanks to you. Your daily positivity and proactiveness has rubbed off on me. On the other hand, perhaps your pessimism today is the result of my bad influence."

"That's not true."

As we talked, I felt my worries fade away. The pearl cultivation had been a success, and I had repaired my relationship with my sister. It was all thanks to Gabriel. I couldn't help but think that as long as I was with him, I could

overcome anything.



Pearl production was progressing smoothly. Slimes were handling everything from catching freshwater black mussels to making, inserting, and removing cores, caring for the mollusks, and cleaning the pearls. About a hundred lake pearls were produced each day and delivered to the slime duke's castle.

We had more than enough pearls at this point, but the rest of the work had to be done by humans. Cultured pearls differed very slightly in size, color, and shape, and only a master craftsman could identify the differences between them. So we hired one from a jewelry workshop in the capital and entrusted the pearls to him. Since we wanted to open a jewelry store in Triste in the future, we had him teach the trade to a few dozen of our residents as well.

No matter how much I watched him sort the pearls and drill holes into them so that they could be used in jewelry, I didn't think I'd be able to replicate the work. The craftsman processed each pearl quickly, without leaving a single scratch. On a complete necklace, the fifty or so pearls all had to be the same size, color, and shape.

The beauty of the finished piece couldn't be described in words. "This is a necklace made with Triste's pearls?" I asked, awed.

The craftsman grinned. "These pearls are incredible. The hardness, shine, size—everything is perfect."

Along with necklaces, the larger pearls were incorporated into tiaras, earrings, and other eye-catching jewelry. The designs had been commissioned from a popular artisan in the capital whom Mrs. Molière was good friends with. Each one was beautifully refined and detailed, and the craftsman reproduced them with care.

Some pearls were called "seed pearls" because they were very small. These had various applications. Similar to larger pearls, they could be used in jewelry, but in this unique situation, they were going to be sewn into my wedding gown. I had no idea how the craftsman managed to drill holes into such tiny pearls, but I couldn't thank him enough.

It was well into winter now. Snowy days brought a dusting of white over the land, but it quickly melted away. The ice covering the many lakes in the region never froze overly thick, perhaps because of the slimes living there.

I didn't know if I was imagining it, but it seemed colder here than in the capital. This morning, I could see my breath, and as I walked through the garden, needle ice crunched under my shoes.

Mrs. Molière came to Triste on this freezing winter day, and as soon as she spotted her sister, she hugged her.

My mother-in-law squeaked. "Wh-What's brought this on?"

"Thank you for the wonderful gift, Maria! I love it so much!"

It had been Mrs. Molière's birthday the other day, and my mother-in-law had sent her the tea set decorated with violets.

"I adore Triste's violets, so the moment I opened the box, I burst into tears," she continued. "Whenever I see it, I feel as if I've returned to my homeland. I use it every day. I know I've written about it more than enough in my letters, but I can't help but want to thank you again in person."

"I'm glad you like it," said my mother-in-law. "But it was Miss Francette who came up with the idea."

"Oh! Is that so?" Mrs. Molière hugged me as well. "Thank you, Miss Francette!"

"Um, all I did was make a suggestion," I said, feeling awkward about the attention.

"Now, now, you're making Miss Francette uncomfortable," my mother-in-law said, coming to my aid. Though she maintained a cool demeanor, her ears were slightly flushed. She must've been happy that her gift had been well received.

After gushing over the tea set some more, Mrs. Molière said, "Oh, right. Miss Francette, I heard that you were having difficulty deciding on wedding favors. Have you settled on anything yet?"

"No, not so far," I replied.

At a wedding ceremony, the bride and groom shared their happiness with the

guests in the form of small gifts. In Triste, it was customary to give bonbonnières filled with sweets. However, bonbonnières had become a staple Triste souvenir that anyone could buy at the Lakeside Duck Bakery. Because of that, I wanted to choose something else.

“How about teacups with a violet motif, filled with sweets?” Mrs. Molière suggested.

“That might work!” I replied. Teacups and sweets—we could delight both adults and children with those. “I’ll discuss it with Gabriel as soon as I can. Thank you, Mrs. Molière!”

“Oh, it was nothing.”

The matter of wedding favors had been settled surprisingly easily. We continued to discuss recent events for a bit but not at length, as we didn’t have the time to enjoy a leisurely chat. Our main goal was to decorate my wedding outfit.

“Now, let’s make Miss Francette’s dress!” Mrs. Molière declared.

At last, it was time to sew the pearls into the wedding gown. My mother-in-law put on arm covers so that her dress sleeves wouldn’t get in the way.

“Oh, those are lovely, Maria,” said Mrs. Molière.

“I know. I remembered my nanny used to wear some, so I had a tailor in the village make these for me.” My mother-in-law had also prepared arm covers for me and Mrs. Molière. “We don’t have much time before the wedding. Let’s finish this posthaste!”

“Yes!” Mrs. Molière and I replied.

In the workroom, my mother-in-law had put up a handwritten sign that read “Chitchat prohibited! Move your hands, not your mouth!” Since the pearl cultivation had taken longer than expected, there was less time to work on the dress. We couldn’t afford to engage in idle chatter.

“I’ll have to watch myself,” Mrs. Molière murmured softly.

I kept my mouth tightly shut to avoid saying anything by accident.

The three of us had designed my wedding dress together. It would have large

pearls scattered across the bust and seed pearls embroidered with silver thread in a floral pattern on the skirt. The veil would be adorned with pearls too, sprinkled about in various sizes to resemble stars in the sky.

I was concentrating on my work in silence when a scream rang out.

“O-Ow!” Mrs. Molière exclaimed for the nth time that day. Apparently sewing wasn’t her forte. I’d lost count of how many times she’d pricked herself with her needle.

“Julietta, after this many times, you must be used to it, no? Please be quiet!” my mother-in-law complained. Not that she was much better—her hands were covered in bandages too.

As it turned out, both sisters were terrible at sewing.

“You’re very good at this, Miss Francette,” said Mrs. Molière.

“Indeed,” said my mother-in-law.

“No, it’s nothing special...” I definitely wasn’t skilled enough to be praised, but the sisters seemed to think I was.

“I’m sorry for being so clumsy,” Mrs. Molière said with tears in her eyes.

“It’s fine,” I said. “Everyone learns at a different speed.”

“You’re such a sweet girl, Miss Francette!”

Progress was slowing down, so I suggested we take a break. Tea and guimauves were promptly served.

“Mrs. Molière, these are the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s new guimauves,” I said. Nervously, I waited for her to try them, unsure if they would suit the palate of someone who had sampled the large variety of sweets the capital had to offer.

“Oh my, what a beautiful color.”

I explained that they were made with berries from Triste, and she peered at them with great interest. After popping one into her mouth, she broke out into a broad smile.

“Why, it’s delicious! The sweet and tart flavor reminds me of the berries I ate as a child. Our family would have berry desserts made for us every year, you

see, and I loved all of them.”

“Triste’s berries are more acidic than those from other regions, but when you make them into sweets, they mellow out into just the right balance of sweet and sour,” I remarked.

“Yes, indeed,” said my mother-in-law. “The sweets made from local berry puree are exquisite.”

I was relieved that they both liked the guimauves. Judging from how quickly they devoured them, they seemed to have been craving something sweet.

“I’m shocked by my lack of dexterity, though,” Mrs. Molière lamented.

“As am I, Julietta.”

The sisters sighed deeply in unison.

“We might not make it in time at this rate,” said Mrs. Molière.

“I dread the very idea of it,” said my mother-in-law.

I’d heard that my mother was skilled at this kind of work, but I couldn’t possibly call her over.

“Perhaps we should enlist help from Nico, Rico, Coco, or Constance,” I said.

The sisters disagreed with my suggestion.

“Miss Francette, the wedding gown must be decorated as a family,” my mother-in-law replied.

“Yes, Maria is right!”

I loved the servants as if they were family, but apparently, that didn’t count as far as tradition went.

“Wh-What about having Gabriel help, then?” I asked.

My mother-in-law crossed her arms and frowned. “He *is* good with his hands like his father was. However...!”

“However?”

“I do not want him to find out about my gracelessness!” My mother-in-law clenched her fists and gave me a pleading look with her bloodshot eyes. “You

may think it's a trivial thing to lose self-esteem over, but he's the one person I don't want to see me like this."

"O-Oh." I didn't think Gabriel would say anything about her lack of sewing skill, but perhaps this insecurity was a result of their complicated mother-son relationship. "Um, how about having Wibble help, then?" I didn't know if the slime was capable of sewing, but it was certainly extremely talented.

"Does Wibble know how to sew?"

"I've never asked, but it's helped me with cooking and cleaning before, so it might be able to."

My mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière looked at each other for a second before nodding.

"Wibble is family, so I think that would be fine," my mother-in-law said.

"Let's have it help since Maria and I are of no use," said Mrs. Molière.

And so, we called Wibble to the workroom. The sisters ran up to the slime, startling the poor thing.

"Wibble, we need your help!" my mother-in-law pleaded.

"Please, Wibble!" Mrs. Molière exclaimed.

"Huuuh? What's wrooong?"

We explained the situation.

"Ohhh, okay!" The wise slime understood immediately. *"Wibble will try to sew!"*

"Thank you," I said.

And so, I taught Wibble how to sew.

"This is how you thread the needle," I explained. "And this is how you stitch. It'll be easier if you follow the diagram for the design."

For some reason, my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière were also listening intently and nodding along to my lesson. Perhaps it hadn't been an issue of dexterity but of having never been taught how to sew properly. At any rate, everyone seemed to gain a better understanding of it.

Wibble transformed one of its tentacles into a needle, skillfully picked up the thread and a pearl, and began to sew. *“Like this, Fra?”*

“Yes, that’s perfect.”

The slime’s eyes lit up with glee—as did the sisters’.

“I’ve gotten better at it!” my mother-in-law exclaimed.

“Me too, Maria!”

“You’re all doing great,” I said.

“Yay!”

I couldn’t thank Wibble enough for easing the tense atmosphere.

The slime was even better at sewing than I’d expected. At some point, it began manipulating countless needles at once with its tentacles. Anyone who didn’t know what was going on would probably think a slime was attacking the dress. It was a terrifying sight, but the embroidery was progressing with unbelievable speed—the slime’s movements were so fast that I found myself worrying.

“W-Wibble, isn’t it difficult to work so quickly?” I asked.

“Nope, it’s really fun!”

“That’s good to hear.”



I'd expected the dress to take us about a month, but thanks to Wibble, it was done in no time at all. The finished bridal gown was placed on a mannequin for us to inspect.

"This is my wedding dress..." I murmured.

Its beauty rendered me speechless. The lake pearls Gabriel and I had developed shone atop the pure-white dress and long veil. I was so proud of the wonderful wedding ensemble we'd created together.

"Mother, Mrs. Molière, and Wibble, thank you all so much," I said.

"That's our line," said my mother-in-law. "Right, Julietta?"

"Yes! Our incompetence had me fearing the worst at first," said Mrs. Molière.

The sisters were more than satisfied with how the dress had turned out.

"You also made our childhood dream come true, Miss Francette," Mrs. Molière added.

"Yes!"

They both seemed very happy. I was sincerely glad that I hadn't given up on the pearls.

Mrs. Molière gently lifted Wibble and nuzzled her cheek against it. "We also have to thank Wibble's amazing contribution."

"Yup! Wibble worked hard!"

"We aren't finished yet, though," I said. "We still need to sew pearls into Gabriel's wedding attire, albeit not as many as mine."

"Yes, let's keep at it," said my mother-in-law. "I don't know if pearls will suit that boy, though."

"It'll be fine!" said Mrs. Molière. "Gabby is beautiful just like you, Maria, so the pearls will look great on him!" As she spoke, she held a pearl up to her sister and gave an approving nod.

Since Gabriel's outfit required less work, the three of us completed it without Wibble's help. We sewed pearls along the area where his boutonnière—a decoration worn on the lapel—would go and the buttons of his shirt.

After three days of hard work, the wedding outfits were complete.

In the afternoon, I was visited by Emilie and Solene. Since I had asked them to be my bridesmaids, we were going to hold a meeting to discuss matters.

It was their first time meeting each other. Solene was surprised to hear that Emilie was the ogre duke, but she didn't show any signs of feeling intimidated. Her experience serving a variety of customers at a pastry store was nothing to scoff at. Emilie quickly grew fond of the cheerful Solene too.

I showed them the wedding outfits that had just been completed.

"Wow, they're so pretty!" Solene exclaimed.

"They're even better than I imagined, Miss Francette," said Emilie.

Their eyes sparkled as they gazed at the garments.

"You're going to look gorgeous in this, Francette," said Solene.

"I can't wait for the wedding," Emilie said.

"I have to work, so I won't be coming to Triste until the day before the ceremony," said Solene.

"I'm not sure of my plans yet, but I may be able to come earlier," said Emilie.

"Thank you, Lady Emilie," I said. "That's reassuring."

I let them know that my mother and sister would be visiting as well.

"Your mom's a former imperial princess, and your sister's the Empire's current crown princess, right?" Solene asked.

"Oh gosh, I'm so nervous!" Emilie exclaimed.

"It'll be fine," I said. "Don't worry." If anyone was going to face their wrath, it would be me. I wanted Emilie and Solene to relax and enjoy their stay in Triste.

The bridesmaids' meeting had mainly been an excuse to have a pleasant chat over tea and sweets, and that was exactly what we did.



Preparations for the Fowl Knight Festival were moving along nicely as well.

Coco finished her beautiful sign, and the residents loved it. It was going to be displayed at the village entrance during the festival.

“My parents will be happy to see it too,” Coco said, unusually giddy.

The fowl knights were going to hold duck races as an attraction. They had remodeled the open space where the ducks exercised on sunny days into a racetrack, and the plan was to allow others to spectate.

When Gabriel heard about the races, he first showed concern about the gambling aspect. However, the prize for winning was going to be an assortment of new sweets from the Lakeside Duck Bakery, so people of all ages would be able to enjoy the event. Upon hearing that, Gabriel gave his approval without further question.

Alexandrine was going to be participating in the races too. I was told that she was sprinting down the track on a daily basis. The exercise meant that she was eating more, and she had gained quite a lot of muscle mass. Carrying her, I realized she was heavier, and her body was firmer than before.

When Nico would try to pick her up with the intent of bringing her to a place where she could sunbathe, Alexandrine would dash away like the wind. With those fast feet of hers, I couldn't help but wonder if there was a single duck in Triste that could compete with her.

We also received a request to participate in the Fowl Knight Festival from an unexpected person: the siren duke. Apparently, she wanted to set up a booth to present the Bureau of Magical Research's findings and recruit new members. Gabriel replied to her letter, asking what exactly she wanted to present, and her answer was “homemade zombies produced by magic.” Gabriel politely declined her application.

We received requests from other monster dukes too. The treant duke wanted to set up a donation booth for the Church, the fenrir duke wanted to hold an autograph session for his fan club, and the harpy duke offered to patrol the festival for heretics. Gabriel turned down all of them.

The monster dukes really are a colorful bunch.

As for the dragon duke, Prince Axel, he expressed interest in being the head

of security for our wedding. It was a great honor, but at the same time, I couldn't help but wonder if it was acceptable to have the future king do so much for us. After discussing it with the family, I decided to accept his offer.

Incidentally, if word got out that Prince Axel was attending our wedding, we would be flooded with young noble ladies from all over the country seeking to court him. As such, his attendance was going to remain under wraps until the day of the ceremony.

My wedding had grown so unexpectedly large in scale. I could only pray that no major issues would crop up during the event.

Replies to our wedding invitations were steadily coming in. I was concerned about the potential reunion between my father and my mother and sister. My mother probably wouldn't be outright angry with him for the trouble he'd caused, but the atmosphere was bound to be tense. I'd considered not inviting him for that reason, but when I'd consulted with Gabriel, he'd advised me that I should still give him the opportunity to see me on my special day. Hearing that made me feel guilty. Gabriel's father was still in the wind—no one knew where he was, so it was impossible to send him an invitation. At the very least, Gabriel probably wished he could know that his father was alive and well, perhaps living a quiet life in the capital.

I decided to invite my father. It just meant that I would have to devote myself to acting as a buffer between him and my mother and sister. I told myself that André, the attendant my mother had sent to keep an eye on my father, would be present too, so I wouldn't need to worry too much.

I wondered if there was anything that could be done about Gabriel's father. It was going to be a grand wedding, with many people gathering from outside Triste. If he was alive, I wanted to show him that his son was doing an amazing job as the slime duke. However, it was possible that Gabriel and his mother would feel uncomfortable seeing him again after so long, and just for the wedding at that. It wouldn't be right of me to search for him and invite him without their permission.

I timidly asked my mother-in-law about it before doing anything, and her response surprised me.

“Allow my husband to attend Gabriel’s wedding? Absolutely not! He doesn’t deserve to...or at least, that’s what I would have said in the past.”

“Your stance has changed?” I asked.

“Yes...I suppose it has. Unlike before, Triste is undergoing positive growth. I no longer envy the people who abandoned this land. I’ve heard that we can’t accept all the people wishing to migrate here—not even those who left and want to return. It’s a fortunate problem to have. Just as Triste has changed, so has my heart. I even feel as though I can forgive my husband who left. Well, so long as he stayed out of my sight, I’d allow him to attend the wedding.”

From the sound of it, she didn’t want to talk to him, but she didn’t mind letting him see Gabriel on his big day.

“My husband is an incredibly cowardly man, so he’ll probably regret abandoning his role as a father for the rest of his life,” she continued. “Perhaps he’ll feel a bit better if he sees Gabriel getting married.”

To me, it seemed like my mother-in-law was showing love in her own way. The more I heard, the more I wanted to make it a reality. Perhaps it was none of my business, but if there was anything I could do, I wanted to explore the possibility.

I brought it up with Gabriel too, as casually as I could.

“My father? Well, if he wants to attend, I won’t mind. But if he gets in a fight with my mother, I’m not confident that I’ll be able to stop them. For the record, my father would definitely lose.”

At any rate, neither Gabriel nor his mother seemed completely against the idea of seeing him again. Though apparently, they had never asked the knights or a detective to search for him. Perhaps he would actually be quite easy to find.

I immediately hired a detective to look for Gabriel’s father. I didn’t know if there was enough time before the wedding, but I had a sliver of hope that he would be found.



The harsh winter passed quickly, and spring arrived. In Triste, this season was heralded by green sprouts poking out of the soil and a slight dampness clinging to the trees and plants. With the wedding drawing near, everyone was busy with preparations.

Since the wedding and festival period was expected to be chaotic, additional knights had been dispatched to Triste to help keep things orderly. Prince Axel had ordered them not to intrude upon the slime duke family, so they had set up an encampment and were preparing their own meals. However, I couldn't just ignore them when they were here for our sake. I had the triplets regularly bring them sweets from the Lakeside Duck Bakery, which the knights seemed to greatly appreciate.

Some of the locals liked to watch the activity at the encampment from a distance, since it was so rare for knights to be dispatched here from the capital. They wanted to bring the knights refreshments too, so I asked Gabriel to let them deliver provisions over several staggered trips. Now, whenever the locals approached the camp, the knights on guard duty would wave to them. It was a very heartwarming exchange.

Tourists were steadily coming in—arriving early to avoid wyvern flight congestion closer to the festival. As Constance reported on the situation, I began to worry about how the village was faring. Gabriel shared my concern.

“Gabriel, can we go check on Chagrin?” I asked.

“If we make it quick, it should be fine...but it would be problematic if we attracted a crowd,” he replied.

The newspaper had recently published a feature on the slime duke. As a result, Gabriel had become a celebrity. There were days when tourists would spot him and flock to him, rendering him stuck for upwards of an hour.

“Why don't we wear disguises, then?” I suggested.

“Disguises?”

“Yes.”

He stroked his chin. “That sounds like fun. Even changing our hair colors would probably make us look like different people.”

“Indeed, your hair color is quite unique. Would you happen to have any wigs?”

He shook his head. “Come to think of it, I haven’t shown you this trick before.”

“Oh? What trick?”

Gabriel summoned his black slime and plopped it atop his head. He muttered an order, and the slime coiled up before springing into the air with all its might. When it landed back down, flattening on impact, it spread to encompass Gabriel’s head. In the blink of an eye, the slime had transformed into short, black hair. Apparently there was no need for wigs when you had slimes.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “I didn’t know your slimes could do that!”

It felt kind of refreshing to see Gabriel with short hair. His usual long, pearl-white hair gave him a soft and gentle impression, but this short, black hair made him look tough and fierce. It was amazing how simply changing the length and color of a person’s hair could make such a difference in how they were perceived.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Do I look like a different person?”

“Yes! You look cool with short hair too.”

“C-Cool? Um, I see. Do you prefer this hairstyle, Fran? Or do you like it more when it’s long?”

“I like both. But since you’re a magician, long hair is better, isn’t it?”

Magicians kept their hair long because it allowed them to draw more mana from the earth. I always envied Gabriel because his hair was silkier and shinier than mine.

“That’s true, but if you’d said that you preferred my hair short, I would have cut it,” he said.

“You don’t have to go that far. You’d be wonderful no matter what you did with your hair.”

Gabriel blushed, the redness reaching his ears. I didn’t think I’d said anything *that* embarrassing, though.

“Fran, you would probably say that even if all of my hair fell out,” he said.

“I’m sure I would. When I say you’re wonderful, I’m talking about what’s inside, not outer appearances.”

“Th-Thank you.” He cleared his throat and changed the subject, his face still flushed. “Erm, would you like to try changing your hair color too?”

“Can I?”

“Yes, of course. Which color would you like?”

I’d have to choose from Gabriel’s other tamed slimes—the colored ones, to be precise. There was the light-red Wibble, the blue slime, the yellow slime, the red slime, the green slime, and the milk-white kaolin slime.

“I admire people with light-red hair,” I said. “The color looks cute.”

“Wibble, then. What about the length and texture?”

“I’ve always dreamed of having waist-length hair that’s soft and fluffy like cat fur.” My hair was thick and straight. Though I curled it with an iron every day, it would always revert to being flat the next morning. I couldn’t maintain that light and airy hairstyle.

“Very well. Wibble, can you do that for Fran?”

“Leave it to Wibble!”

Wibble jumped onto my head and transformed in accordance with my request. I watched my locks become soft, wavy, and light red, then lifted one in my hand. It felt shockingly natural.

“This is amazing!” I exclaimed. “It’s just like real hair. Thank you, Wibble. My dream’s come true!”

“It was nothing!” Wibble said, its eyes and mouth suddenly appearing on the tuft of hair. I couldn’t help but giggle at the sight.

“Gabriel, how do I look?” I asked.

“Absolutely adorable! But I’m a fan of your usual look too, of course.”

“Thank you. That makes me happy.” Not only had he complimented my new hair, he’d also praised my regular appearance. It felt like getting a two-for-one

deal.

“Fran, you might want to wear something more plain to help blend in with the villagers.”

“No problem. I couldn’t bear to throw away the dresses I wore in the old part of town, so I brought them with me when I moved here.”

I was afraid that he might laugh at my poverty-influenced behavior, but instead, he smiled and said, “It’s great that you take good care of your things. I have my own set of clothes for when I’m going undercover, so I’ll wear those.”

Wibble started to giggle. *“Wow, going undercover? You sound like a celebrity!”*

“Gabriel *is* a celebrity,” I said. “With all of these tourists visiting, there’ll be chaos if he goes to the village.”

“Will they ask for Gabriel’s autograph?”

“Yes, without a doubt.”

“Um, I’m quite sure they won’t,” Gabriel interrupted.

“You never know. I’d like one, personally.”

“Wibble wants an autograph too!”

“You’re both joking, right?” Gabriel asked.

If Coco were to sell a portrait of Gabriel signed by the man himself, I would definitely buy it.

“Sign Wibble!”

“You already have my seal engraved on your body because of our contract,” Gabriel said.

“Oh, right!”

What a perfect double act, I thought. But I didn’t have the time to indulge in their comedic rapport. “I’m going to get changed. It shouldn’t take long.”

“Let me know when you’re ready,” said Gabriel.

We split up to don our disguises. I walked past my rows of garments and

selected a dress from the end of the vestuary, where it had made its home. It was a piece I had purchased from a secondhand store after my sweets had been bought for the first time. The dress was worn-out, but I had felt too attached to it to leave it behind when I moved to Triste. I'd never expected to be wearing it again. At first, the fabric had been too stiff for me, and it had chafed my skin. But now, I could wear any kind of clothing without issue since my skin was tougher.

I'd also brought a straw hat with me from the old part of town. Wearing it would make my flashy hair color less conspicuous. This hat had been given to me by a neighbor, who had seen me tending to the lawn one blazingly sunny day and said, "You must be hot. Wear this." I had tried to return it when I was done, but they had told me to keep it. Later, when Gabriel had begun sending me meat and vegetables, I'd shared them with my neighbor to repay their kindness.

As I traced my fingers over the dress and straw hat, vivid memories of life in the old part of town came back to me. It had truly been difficult, but in hindsight, I felt that it had given me the strength to survive. But I reminded myself I didn't have the time to wax nostalgic and hurriedly changed my clothes before going to find Gabriel.

"I'm sorry for taking so long, Gabriel," I said.

"No need to apologize. I just finished getting ready too."

Gabriel was wearing a worn-out shirt, a jacket that must have been many years old, and trousers with frayed hems. It was an ensemble commonly seen on men in the region. He also wore a hat, making him difficult to recognize at first glance.

"Oh, that's a refreshing look," I remarked. "Will you be all right without your glasses?"

"Yes. I'm augmenting my eyesight with magic. I can't maintain it for too long, but a quick visit to the village should be fine."

"Wow, that's a useful spell."

Without the glasses to obscure his beautiful features, I wondered if he would

stand out in the village. He'd pulled the front of his hat low, though, so it probably wouldn't be an issue.

"Shall we go?" Gabriel asked.

"Yes, let's."

Since we were in disguise, we couldn't teleport directly to the village—that would expose our identities. Instead, Gabriel intended to have us arrive a bit farther away. He recited the spell, and a magic circle appeared. We were slowly engulfed in bright light, and I closed my eyes as the scenery began changing around us. When I opened them, we were in the shade of a tree a short distance from the village.

Gabriel gently tugged my hand and led me forwards. After five minutes of walking, we arrived at Chagrin. There was a large crowd at the village entrance, as if a wyvern flight had just landed. As we continued onward, we found that the restaurants and shops were busier than usual.

I didn't know if it was because our disguises were working or because there were so many tourists, but no one recognized us, allowing us to observe the village activity completely undisturbed. We couldn't help but laugh that no one had noticed us—we joked that we felt like mischievous children who had succeeded in playing a prank.

"Anyway, this has had quite the economic impact," I remarked.

"It really has. I never dreamed that my marriage would bring about something like this. Even though I'm seeing it in person, I still can't believe it."

Our country didn't have much in the way of entertainment. For people who were always visiting the same tourist spots again and again, Triste must've felt like a breath of fresh air.

"We'll have to think of ways to keep them coming back," I said.

"Indeed."

With the knights patrolling the streets, it didn't look like safety would be an issue. The children weren't too bothered by the crowds—they seemed to be playing happily like usual.

“I don’t see any major concerns at the moment,” I said.

“Neither do I.”

Relieved, we sneaked out of the village and headed back.

At home, Constance brought me a letter on a silver tray.

“Lady Francette, a letter from the capital has arrived for you.”

“Oh, thank you.” *Is it from my father or someone else?*

I turned the envelope over and found the seal of the detective agency I had placed a request with a few months ago. They were probably sending me the results of their investigation into Gabriel’s father’s whereabouts.

I hurried to my room with the letter, but upon arriving, I found my letter opener missing from my desk drawer. It then occurred to me that Constance had placed it on the tray with the message, but I had forgotten to take it in my rush. Just as I was about to tear into the envelope with my hands, Wibble hopped off of my head and held out a sharpened tentacle.

“Fra, use Wibble!”

“O-Oh my. Thank you, Wibble.”

I cut the seal with the slime-turned-letter-opener and took out the sheet of paper. It read, “We searched for Gabriel’s father in the capital and the surrounding cities but did not find anyone who seemed like they could be him.” The agency couldn’t even be sure if he was dead or alive. As they hadn’t found his name in any of the cemeteries in each city, it was probably the latter. Still, his whereabouts were a mystery.

I heaved a sigh.

“Fra, what’s wrong?”

“They couldn’t find Gabriel’s father.”

“Oh...too bad. Way back, when Wibble got in a fight with Gabriel and was about to dry out, Gabriel’s dad poured water on Wibble in secret.”

“He was a kind man, huh?”

“Yup! So Wibble was sad when he left.”

Even Wibble wanted to see him again. I still wasn't sure whether my mother-in-law did or not, but perhaps Gabriel wanted to talk to him too. I couldn't give up yet.

Come to think of it, Gabriel had said that he had a portrait of his father in safekeeping, hidden such that his mother wouldn't find it. Knowing his father's facial features would surely aid in the search.

The detective had written that investigating further would be difficult. In that case, I would just have to ask someone else. I picked up a pen and began writing a letter.



At last, it was the day of my mother and sister's arrival. Even my mother-in-law seemed anxious for once. She kept alternating between standing up, sitting down, and peering out the window. Mrs. Molière had come from the capital to support her sister, but both of them were looking around restlessly.

“Um, mother, Mrs. Molière, are you all right?” I asked.

“You seem calm, Miss Francette,” said my mother-in-law.

“I'm afraid my sister and I are very nervous,” said Mrs. Molière.

“Well, I'm somewhat nervous too,” I said. I was anxious but not to an extreme level—our visitors were my family members, after all.

“What kind of person is your mother?” Mrs. Molière asked.

“She usually seems calm, but... How do I put this? It's like her smile doesn't reach her eyes. She always pays close attention to whomever she's dealing with—she never lets down her guard, and nothing gets past her.” Lies didn't work on her, so there was no need for flattery. “If you're too polite, it might raise her suspicions, so I think you should just act the way you normally do.”

I thought I had given sound advice, but Mrs. Molière weakly lamented, “What? I don't think I can treat a former imperial princess like any normal person.”

“Normally, I wouldn't even have an opportunity to meet someone like her,”

my mother-in-law added.

Mrs. Molière explained that she hadn't ever met my mother during the period when my whole family lived in the capital. "I'd always wanted to say hello, but the timing never worked out."

"Now that you mention it, I don't think she attended social events very often," I said.

I had the feeling that my mother had avoided mingling with high society, partially due to the differences in etiquette between our country and the Empire, but probably also because she hadn't wanted to hear people gossiping about her philandering husband. She hadn't even been at the soiree where my sister's engagement had been rescinded. She hadn't held tea parties, nor had she seemed to have any close contacts among the nobles in our country. Instead, she'd often invited her good friends from the Empire to visit. Those connections had probably helped when she'd returned to high society in her home country with my sister.

"It's already quite humbling to meet your mother—I can't believe your sister is the crown princess too," my mother-in-law said.

"We'll do our best together," Mrs. Molière said, holding her sister's hand to reassure her.

I'm glad she's here to support my mother-in-law.

"Um, I'm going to check on Gabriel," I said.

"Yes, that's a good idea," said my mother-in-law. "He might be in a worse state than we are."

"Gabby gets nervous very easily," Mrs. Molière added.

That just made me worry even more. I hurried to Gabriel's room.

"Gabriel, do you have a minute?" I asked, hesitantly inching the door open.

"What do you need, Fran?" he replied immediately.

"Um, nothing in particular. I just wanted to see you."

He peeked out from behind the door, looking extremely haggard. There were

ghastly dark circles under his eyes.

“Oh my, Gabriel. What’s wrong?” We’d had breakfast separately today, so I hadn’t seen him until this moment.

“Ah, well, I went to bed early last night, but I couldn’t fall asleep.”

Apparently, he’d been so worked up about today’s challenging events that he hadn’t been able to sleep until dawn, when he had passed out.

“There’s still a few hours before my mother and sister arrive,” I said. “You should take a nap.”

“I lay down with that intention, but I couldn’t sleep at all.”

“You can use my lap, then.” Without waiting for a response, I pulled him by the arm and led him to the sofa. There, I sat down and encouraged him to sit next to me.

“Um, I really can’t burden you with this, Fran.”

“Don’t worry about it. Come,” I said, patting the seat next to me.

Gabriel relented, taking his place on the sofa.

“Now use my lap as a pillow.”

“But...”

“I’m good at this. You’ll be asleep in no time,” I declared.

“Whom have you done this for before?”

“Alexandrine. When I scratch under her beak, she gets this drowsy look. Within five minutes, she’s out like a light.”

“Alexandrine...the duck?”

“Yes, that’s right. I’ll help you fall asleep too. Just leave it to me.”

Gabriel caved in to my enthusiasm and lay down with his head on my lap. When I removed his glasses, he seemed restless. They were probably like a part of his body to him. Perhaps he felt uneasy when separated from them.

“I’ll put your glasses right here,” I said.

“Okay.”

Next, I covered his closed eyelids with my hand, shutting out any additional light. Gently stroking his head, I began singing a lullaby. I'd learned this song from the children at the orphanage where I used to volunteer. However, I'd forgotten some of the lyrics, so I had to hum parts of it. I doubted all this would make Gabriel fall asleep, but lying down and relaxing would at least give his body some rest. Fully reclining like this was just as important in achieving any amount of respite.

My humming came to a pause. *What was the next part of the song again?* As I was trying to recall it, Gabriel's breathing, soft and rhythmic, filled the silence. Much to my surprise, I had inadvertently lulled him to sleep.

I removed my hand from his eyes and gazed down at his beautiful face. As usual, I found myself envying his long eyelashes and clear skin. I almost wanted to ask him for skin-care tips.

Even with me staring at him and shifting my body slightly, he showed no sign of waking up. He appeared to have fallen into a deep sleep in mere minutes, perhaps due to a combination of fatigue from the past few hectic days and the lack of sleep last night. I realized he was entrusting himself to me like this because he felt safe with me, and it made me love him even more.

In just one week, Gabriel and I would become husband and wife. The thought filled my heart with joy. I'd never felt this way before. I had faith that he would give me a happy life, and I was determined to do the same for him.

After some time, Gabriel suddenly sneezed and opened his eyes. I peered into his face, and he gasped.

"Was I asleep?" he asked.

"Yes, you were sleeping soundly for about an hour."

"What?!" He quickly got up and lowered his head. "I can't believe I slept on your lap for so long. I'm so sorry. Um...your legs didn't go numb, did they?"

"No, not at all."

"I must've said strange things in my sleep, didn't I?"

“You were quiet the whole time.”

He was also concerned about snoring and grinding his teeth, but there hadn't been any of that either.

“That's a relief,” he said. “Wibble once told me that I snore and talk in my sleep too much and that my sleeping face looks like a dried-up stingray.”

“I've never seen a dried-up stingray, but your sleeping face was beautiful.”

“That can't be true.”

He couldn't see his sleeping face himself, so he'd just have to trust me for today. “Gabriel, there's still time before Adele and my mother arrive. Why don't you get some more rest?”

“No, I'm fine. Thanks to you, I slept well, even if it was only for an hour. I don't feel drowsy or fatigued at all anymore.”

“That's good to hear.”

Since we'd been working at a breakneck pace until today, there wasn't anything urgent left to take care of, so we could relax until my family arrived.

“It's good to have my energy back, but I'd like to do something about my dull complexion and the dark circles under my eyes,” he said. “Would washing my face help?”

“I don't think that would be enough. I could hide them with makeup, though.”

“Makeup? I've never tried it before. Do men use makeup?”

“I assume stage actors wear some, but I've never heard that other men do.”

“I see.” Gabriel crossed his arms and furrowed his brow, deep in thought.

“If you don't want to, I won't force you.”

“No, could I ask you to do it for me?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I'm nervous about wearing makeup for the first time, but I also don't want our guests to see my current condition.”

“All right.”

Makeup wasn't my strong suit, but for Gabriel's sake, I'd try my best. I retrieved a makeup kit from my room and stood in front of him, ready to begin.

"Can you apply your own makeup, Fran?" he asked.

"Yes, well, I suppose you could say I was forced to learn how..."

Before my family's downfall, an attendant had done it for me, and afterwards, I hadn't even had time to think about wearing any. But after getting engaged to Gabriel, I had set my mind on looking my best. I had bought all of the basic cosmetics, only to despair because I didn't know how to apply them. After much agonizing, I had tried my best to remember what the attendant had done, then practiced over and over until I'd gotten it right.

I stared into the distance, lost in thoughts of the past. Gabriel immediately noticed. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked," he said.

"No, that's not true." I told him about my situation at the time, and his expression gradually darkened.

"I see. You needed cosmetics too. It was thoughtless of me to send you nothing but food when you were living in the old part of town."

"No, the food helped me the most! I was even able to share it with my kind neighbor, and I'm grateful for that."

"That's a relief."

Our conversation had taken us away from the matter at hand. I needed to start working on his makeup. "Can you take off your glasses and close your eyes?"

"Of course." Gabriel did as told.

I applied lotion and beauty cream to his face and then foundation around the dark circles. If I laid the makeup on too thick, sweat would make it smear, so I repeated the process in thin layers. Finally, I used a makeup brush to apply powder.

"Oh my, it turned out better than I expected," I remarked, holding up a mirror.

He looked surprised when he saw his reflection. "I didn't know that makeup

could improve one's complexion so well."

"You have clear skin, so it looks great on you."

There wasn't a single flaw in his beautiful face. With more makeup, he could look like an androgynous elf.

"I have less to worry about now," he said. "Thank you, Fran."

"It was my pleasure."

Cuddled together, we spent the remaining time chatting as we waited for my mother and sister.

Constance came to the room and informed us that the imperial delegation had arrived. After exchanging looks, the three of us headed to the front entrance to greet them.

It was clear that Gabriel, my mother-in-law, and Mrs. Molière were nervous. To reassure them, I smiled at the two women and gently patted Gabriel on the back, whispering in the latter's ear that everything would be fine.

Constance opened the front door, revealing my mother and sister accompanied by a large convoy of escorts. It was my first time seeing my sister since Prince Mael had banished her around three years ago. She'd become much, much more beautiful than I remembered. Now she had the majestic air of a crown princess—her mere presence was overwhelming.

My sister greeted Gabriel first. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Duke Slime."

"Likewise, Your Highness. It is an honor to meet you," Gabriel replied in a dignified manner, as if to say that he wasn't the slightest bit nervous.

"Francette, it's been a while. I missed you."

Since the imperial delegation was behind her, I was probably obligated to address her formally. "Yes, I am sincerely happy to see you as well, Your Highness."

I bowed deeply and she told me to raise my head. An air of loneliness seemed to flash over her features for a moment in my peripheral vision, but when I looked at her face again, she was back to her usual stoic expression. Had I

imagined it?

Following our greeting, Gabriel went to dine with the delegation. He led them to the hall in a distinguished manner.

Meanwhile, I brought my mother and sister to the parlor. I had arranged for us to have tea with my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière, followed by lunch. I knew they would be tired from the journey, and this way, they could rest for a while.

However, when we arrived at the parlor, my mother stopped outside the door and said, “Adele, you must wish to speak with Francette, no? Why don’t you two spend some time together first?”

Her voice was calm, but her suggestion was outrageous. In our family, my mother’s words were absolute. Everyone knew better than to defy her. As such, the carefully planned schedule in my head instantly fell apart.

If only my sister had refused, this situation could have been avoided, but alas, she accepted the proposal without hesitation. “Yes, you’re right. Francette, let’s spend some time together, just you and me.”

“O-Okay,” I said unenthusiastically, casting a quick glance at Constance and Rico. They nodded, confirming that the parlor was ready and tea had been prepared. I was sure I could trust them to handle whatever was to happen next. “I-In that case, please come inside, Your Highness.”

“Thank you,” my sister said, entering the room with elegant steps.

I suggested that she take a seat on the sofa, but instead, she stood still, her back turned to me. What was the matter?

“Adele?” I asked.

With a sob, she faced me and threw her arms around me. I was taken aback by the tears streaming down her face.

“Wh-What’s wrong? Are you feeling unwell?”

“No... Francette, I’m so sorry!”

“A-About what?”

She didn't elaborate. As she continued to cry, I wondered what she could be apologizing for—I hadn't the faintest clue. All I could do was pat her back and wait for her to calm down. Ever the sensible ones, Constance and Rico refrained from serving us tea in the meantime.



Five minutes later, my sister's tears stopped at last. Constance brought us our tea and meringues with perfect timing.

"Adele, this tea is native to Triste and very delicious," I explained. "The meringues are a popular Lakeside Duck Bakery product, made with lots of berry puree."

"Thank you, Francette." Drinking the warm tea restored the color to my sister's face. "Oh, it really is delicious."

After eating a meringue, she smiled gracefully. I didn't need to ask for her feedback to know that it had been to her liking.

"I'm sorry for losing my composure, Francette," she said.

"It's okay... I was just surprised. I wasn't expecting it." The Adele I knew was always calm, never showing any sign of unrest. "Um, could you explain what happened?"

"I couldn't help but get emotional when I saw your face. I've been wanting to see you for so long." She held my hand. "Thank you for inviting me to your wedding. I always thought you hated me."

"Wh-Why would I?!"

"You suffered so much because of me."

"That wasn't your fault at all."

"No, I failed to manage Prince Mael's relationships with women properly." With a distant look in her eyes, my sister began to explain how frustrating the broken engagement had been for her. "During queen training, I was taught that all women who marry into the royal family must manage the mistresses, because if you don't keep track of them and control their every action, they'll take advantage of your negligence and cause your downfall. However, this guidance was meant to be applied after we'd already been wed. Perhaps no one expected that a prince would take a mistress before getting married."

"I-I see."

"I knew Prince Mael wouldn't like a stiff and formal woman like me, so after getting married, I was planning to select a mistress for him and set up a

‘coincidental’ meeting for them to get acquainted. I was prepared for that from the very beginning.”

Sadly, my sister’s elaborate plan had been foiled and the engagement called off.

“Prince Mael merely fell for a honey trap,” she continued. “There must have been someone orchestrating it from behind the scenes.”

She had a keen intuition, so perhaps she was right. But that was all in the past now.

“I spoke to mother many times about bringing you to the Empire, but she warned me that you were stubborn, so you probably wouldn’t leave the country unless forced to.”

It seemed that our mother understood me well. Back then, I surely would have refused to go to the Empire no matter how much my sister tried to persuade me.

“Mother kept telling me to let father take care of you, so I assumed you were well provided for,” she continued.

“I apologize for keeping the truth from you.”

“Father is to blame for everything. He should have been able to establish comfortable living conditions in a nicer district.”

Our father had accepted his fate all too easily, choosing to live in the old part of town and let his mistresses take care of his needs.

“I still haven’t forgiven him,” my sister said, clenching her fist. “If I see him at your wedding, I might just slap him on the cheek.”

I really didn’t want to have bloodshed at the ceremony. “Um, please refrain. I’m afraid you might hurt yourself.”

“Don’t try to stop me, Francette. For a while now, I’ve been thinking that his crooked nature needs to be corrected. This is a good opportunity to swing down the hammer of justice.”

My sister was the type to never waver in her decisions, so there was probably nothing I could do to stop her. I could only pray that our father would be able to

dodge her attacks.

“Father has changed quite a bit,” I said.

“I don’t believe that for a moment.”

“He reflected on his actions after the knights detained him.”

I explained that he had cut ties with all of his mistresses and now lived a modest life with André, the attendant whom mother had sent. Personally, I felt that it would be fine to leave him alone as long as he wasn’t causing trouble for the family.

“Don’t be naive!” my sister scolded me. “When I received your letter, I interrogated father about what happened. That was how I learned that not only had you been living alone and struggling to put food on the table, you’d been forced to take responsibility for the consequences of him running away with his mistress. Francette, you told father that you would report the incident to me, but you never actually did.”

“I did tell mother, but I didn’t think you would have time for something like this. I put it off until later because I knew you would be busy before your wedding.”

“Francette, did you never think that father was a good-for-nothing?”

“I did and still do. I haven’t forgiven him for what he did.”

“As you shouldn’t. And he should be subjected to the same suffering that you were put through!”

My sister seemed to be burning with anger at our father. I was quite sure that this was the first time I’d ever seen her express her emotions so openly.

“Um, Adele, no matter what happened, I still think the adage of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is wrong.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“Because that cycle might never end—you could seek retribution, only for someone else to want vengeance against you in turn. Besides, if you give him such a clear punishment, he might mistakenly think he’s off the hook afterwards. I think he should have to live with his guilt for the rest of his life, so I

don't want to scold him too harshly or beat him, lest that make him think the matter is settled."

"Francette..." My sister frowned sadly and looked at me with teary eyes.

I held her hand and gave her a reassuring look. "It's okay."

"I can't do anything for you, can I?"

"That's not true. Strangely enough, seeing you get angry on my behalf made me feel better." Probably because this was the first time she had ever expressed such fury. "It was surprising, though. I didn't know you could be so wrathful."

"It's only natural that you weren't aware. I've been holding back these feelings all my life."

As the future queen, my sister had been taught to keep her emotions tucked away at all times—to maintain a calm state of mind like the surface of a still lake.

"But after going to the Empire, my husband told me that was wrong," she continued. "Little by little, I learned to accept my thoughts and feelings and express them as my own emotions."

"So that's what happened."

"That's why, when you first called me 'Your Highness,' I was so sad that I nearly cried. I couldn't break in front of the delegation, though, so I desperately held back my tears."

It seemed that I hadn't imagined the lonely expression on her face at the time.

"Adele, thank you for being angry on my behalf," I said. "That's more than enough for me, so please don't let it torment you any longer."

"Francette...you really are a kind girl."

"Not as kind as you, Adele."

When she heard that, her frown finally left her face.

I whispered in her ear, "Can we continue to act as normal sisters when it's just

the two of us?”

“Of course, Francette. You’re my one and only precious little sister,” she said, flashing me the most beautiful smile I had ever seen.

With all of the misgivings between us ironed out, we excitedly chatted about recent events. My sister wanted to know more about my husband-to-be, Gabriel.

“When I read in your letter that you were engaged to the slime duke, I was shocked beyond belief,” she said. “Um, to be honest, I had assumed that you would marry Prince Axel. Before I left for the Empire, he said to entrust you to his care.”

“Oh. Well, he did keep his promise. Right after you left, he offered to become my guardian, but I immediately declined.”

“What?! Why would you do that?!”

“Prince Axel had already protected us from losing our noble status. I couldn’t possibly impose on him further.”

“I see...”

“But it’s because I lived in the old part of town that I was able to meet Gabriel and Wibble. I believe that my current happiness is a reward for my past efforts, so I’m going to keep working as hard as I can.”

“Your past efforts led to your current happiness... Yes, you’re right.”

Misfortune was unavoidable, but if all you did was complain about it, you wouldn’t find fortune. I had faith that if I stayed optimistic, good things would happen.

“Even at my age, I still have so much to learn from you,” my sister said.

“And I’ve learned a lot from you!” Even the way I carried myself was based on her. Without my sister as a role model, I wouldn’t have appeared dignified in front of others.

“Let’s keep inspiring each other to grow.”

“Yes!”

We reflected on the years we’d been apart. There was no shortage of stories to tell.

“By the way, what kind of person is the slime duke?” my sister asked.

“He’s very sensitive and gentle.”

“Oh? I had the impression that he was the stoic and flawless type.”

I giggled, remembering my first encounter with Gabriel at my home in the old part of town.

“Did I say something funny, Francette?”

“Ah, I was just reminded of our first meeting.” A group of thugs had shown up at my house, and just as they had been about to attack me, Gabriel had come to my rescue, emerging from the hedge with leaves in his hair.

“Is he an amusing person?”

“Yes, he’s always making me laugh.”

“I see. He seemed sort of unapproachable, but I suppose that isn’t the case.”

“Indeed, he’s very friendly.”

Personally, I was curious about the imperial prince who had asked for my sister’s hand in marriage. Apparently I’d once exchanged words with him when I was a child, but I couldn’t recall a single thing about him.

“What about your husband?” I asked. “What is he like?”

“Well...he’s cheerful and intelligent, but I have no idea what he’s really thinking. I suppose you could say he’s good at communicating while obfuscating his true intentions? To be honest, I still don’t know why he chose me.”

“Maybe he developed affection for you back when you were young?”

“That seems unlikely...”

“But normally, it wouldn’t make sense for a future emperor to remain unengaged for as long as he was.”

“You have a point. Thinking back on it, we met when I was six or seven years

old, I believe... I remember holding hands and running around the garden. He taught me how to climb a tree.”

“You climbed a tree?”

“Yes, but he fell and— Oh!” My sister’s hand slapped over her mouth.

“Did you recall something?”

“Yes. He got a cut on his forehead when he fell. It wasn’t a serious injury, but I was panicking and crying, and I shouted, ‘I’ll take responsibility!’ without understanding what it meant.”

In situations like that, taking responsibility meant marriage.

“Perhaps my husband remembered that, and that’s why he wanted to marry me?” my sister mused.

“But you were already engaged to Prince Mael at the time, weren’t you?”

“Indeed.”

“So...” What if the honey trap was set up by the imperial prince? Prince Mael breaking off the engagement could easily be considered an act of disrespect towards the imperial family, yet they did not object. Could that be because the imperial prince had planned everything?

“Were you going to say something, Francette?”

“N-No, it’s nothing!” *Surely he wouldn’t go that far*, I thought, dismissing the possibility. “A-Anyway, a lot has happened, but I’m really glad I’m able to talk to you like this now.”

“Me too.”

My sister explained that it had taken a long time to convince her husband to allow her to stay in Triste for a week.

“Don’t you think he was being unreasonable?” she complained. “I just wanted to spend time with my sister after being separated for so long.”

“He must’ve been worried about you.”

“Even if that were the case, he’s too overprotective. He normally doesn’t even let me go out unless I have a very good reason.”

“I’m surprised he permitted it this time, then.”

“The emperor, the empress, and mother supported me in persuading him.”

“Th-That’s impressive.” It seemed that my sister had powerful allies in the Empire.

“Now that I’m finally free, I plan to truly let loose. I’d like to attend the village festival tomorrow, Francette.”

“Yes, please do! I’ll show you around.”

Our enjoyable conversation continued through the afternoon.

Many royal diplomats arrived in the early evening, and a banquet was held. It was the first time such a large number of dignitaries had gathered at the slime duke’s estate. Gabriel and his mother claimed to be extremely nervous, but if they were, it wasn’t outwardly noticeable.

The head chef and I had come up with the event’s menu together. To pair with the aperitif, the amuse-bouche was marinated crayfish, arranged in the crustacean’s original shape. In early spring, crayfish in Triste were soft from molting, so they were eaten with their shells intact. This unusual dish made for quite the lively conversation.

For the hors d’oeuvres, terrine made with river prawns was served alongside steamed and simmered endives. Both main ingredients were currently in season. The soup was a potage of freshly picked green peas, and the fish course was a creamy trout pie. After some berry sorbet to cleanse the palate, we had the meat entrée, a whole-roast fowl. Dessert was an almond soufflé and a side of locally grown raspberries.

Each dish was made with local products from this abundant region, and judging by the compliments coming from every which way, they were all well received. The banquet began and ended with a friendly atmosphere.

After the meal, the guests split up to socialize. The men went to enjoy a few rounds of billiards, while the women chatted enthusiastically over tea. The imperial delegation and royal diplomats hadn’t brought their wives with them,

so the tea party was really just a family gathering of me, my sister, my mother, mother-in-law, and Mrs. Molière.

I had been so engrossed in catching up with my sister the afternoon past that I hadn't had time to check in with the trio of mature ladies. How had they spent their day? I glanced at them from the corner of my eye and found that they were surprisingly relaxed.

My mother noticed my gaze and said, "Francette, you're fortunate to have such a kind mother-in-law."

"Y-Yes, I'm living very comfortably thanks to her," I stammered.

"She invited a traveling merchant from the capital, so the three of us will be indulging in some shopping tomorrow."

"Adele and I will be going to the festival tomorrow."

"I see. We won't intrude on you sisters, so go ahead and have fun by yourselves."

"Yes, that's the plan."

Gabriel was going to be participating in diplomatic discussions until our wedding day. I hoped we could at least attend the last day of the festival together.

"I'd like to stay longer next time. The nature is beautiful, the food is delicious, and everyone is so hospitable."

It seemed that my mother had taken a liking to Triste. My sister nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps I'll bring my brother and sister-in-law next time," my mother said cheerfully. She was referring to the emperor and empress.

The eyes of my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière widened, and they both trembled. Unsurprisingly, they *really* didn't want that to happen. In fact, Gabriel probably would have fainted if he'd caught wind of the idea.

My sister quickly objected. "Mother, if you invite them here, you'll be causing trouble for everyone."

After a short giggle, my mother said, “Oh, yes, that’s right. How thoughtless of me. My apologies.” To her, the emperor and empress were family. I wished she would be more aware of their incredibly high status.

The tea party came to an end after about an hour. It had been an enjoyable day, but now that it had drawn to a close, I realized how much fatigue I’d accumulated. Coco prepared a hot bath for me, and I had a long, relaxing soak.

Before going to sleep, I was struck with the urge to see Gabriel. I hadn’t had a proper conversation with him all day. *He’s probably tired too, though.*

“Fra, Gabriel’s eyes were wide open and bloodshot. That’s the face he makes when he can’t sleep at night,” Wibble graciously informed me.

“So I wouldn’t be bothering him if I went to see him?”

“Nope! He’ll be really happy!”

“I’ll go and chat with him for a bit, then. Will you come with me, Wibble?”

“Of course!”

I pulled a gown over my nightdress and headed for Gabriel’s room, clutching Wibble to my chest. Light spilled out through the gap below his door, so he was probably still up.

“Gabriel, it’s me, Francette,” I said quietly so as not to wake him if he was asleep. “Are you awake?”

The door flew open.

“Fran!” The moment Gabriel’s eyes alighted on me, I was pulled into his arms.

Wibble, stuck in the middle of our embrace, wailed, *“Wibble’s turning into a pancake!”*

“I was just thinking about how much I missed you today!” Gabriel exclaimed.

“What a coincidence—me too.”

Wibble slipped out from between us. *“Wibble will leave you youngsters alone now!”* it said before leaving. Where in the world had it learned that expression?

“Gabriel, can we talk for a bit?” I asked.

“Of course. Please come in.”

Much to my surprise, there was a bottle of wine on the table in Gabriel’s room. The cork hadn’t been removed yet, and the glass next to it was empty.

“Drinking alone? How unusual,” I remarked.

“Since I don’t hold my liquor too well, I normally don’t drink,” he said. “But the delegation brought me this as a souvenir, and I thought I’d better try it so that I can bring it up in conversation. However, after setting up the table, I couldn’t get into the mood to drink at all. Because of all the wine tasting we did together, it’s as if my mind refuses to drink unless it’s with you.”

“I’m happy you feel that way.” I wouldn’t have been in the mood to drink alone either. Alcohol was something I enjoyed with Gabriel.

“Fran, may I ask you a favor? Could you drink a bit with me?”

“Yes, I can.”

Gabriel skillfully uncorked the bottle without making a sound and decanted the bright-red wine into a glass for me—just a little to start with.

“Let’s have a toast,” he said.

“To what?”

“Hmm...”

“To making it through this hectic day, perhaps?”

“That’s a good idea, but I’d like to recognize your efforts today first.”

Surely Gabriel had worked harder than me. “I didn’t do anything at all. I’d say you’re more deserving of praise for flawlessly carrying out your duties as grand duke.”

“Well then, let’s say since our efforts were equal, we instead toast in honor of the most beautiful lady in the world: Fran, who will soon become my wife.” After declaring that, his face became bright red.

“I’m surprised you can say that after meeting Adele.”

Gabriel tilted his head in confusion, as if he didn’t understand what I was saying.

“Um, didn’t you have any thoughts about her appearance at your first meeting?”

“I’m sorry. I know I met her face-to-face, but I can’t remember what she looked like.”

“You’re joking, right?!” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. My sister was known as the red rose of high society, yet he couldn’t recall her face? It was truly unthinkable.

“Again, I’m sorry. I know I also would’ve seen her in the capital before, but...”

“Adele is a thousand times more beautiful than me!”

“I see.” Despite my insistence, Gabriel still wasn’t convinced. Apparently, he’d never been able to distinguish between women other than me. “The ladies at soirees all have similar hairstyles, similar dresses, and similar demeanors, and they all talk about similar topics. I can’t tell the difference between them.”

“Oh, I can understand that.”

At gatherings where socialization was the main purpose, everyone tended to dress alike. And since they all wore the currently trending makeup, their facial features would inevitably resemble each other too. I recognized people by memorizing hair colors and nose shapes paired with names. This method had been taught to me by my sister, and ever since adopting it, I had been able to avoid incorrectly addressing any acquaintance.

“To be honest, I still can’t quite differentiate between young women,” Gabriel said. “You’re the only exception, Fran. I always find myself thinking you’re beautiful.”

“I-Is that so? I’ll have to endeavor to appear pretty at all times, then.”

“No, it’s not your appearance that’s beautiful, rather it’s your— Wait, that’s not right! You are definitely beautiful!”

It was an oddly forceful assertion coming from someone who was usually quiet and soft-spoken.

“Um, as you once said to me, I love you for your inner beauty, Fran,” he continued. “There are many people and things in the world that are pretty, but

surface-level beauty isn't eternal. Your inner light will continue to shine forever, though, and I find it very dazzling and precious." He raised his glass, perhaps to distract from the embarrassment of having said so much.

"Thank you, Gabriel. I'm overjoyed." I'd never known a simple toast could warm my heart to this extent. I'd have to thank the delegation for gifting us the wine.

"That aside, how was your reunion with your sister?"

"It was much more peaceful and relaxing than I expected."

"That's good. I was fretting about it all day, since you were always referring to her as 'Your Highness.' I thought something might have happened between you two."

"If people saw that we were close, my existence could become a weak point for Adele, so I took on that distant attitude whenever we were in the presence of others."

"I see. It would certainly be dangerous if the wrong person noticed that the crown princess doted on her younger sister."

"Exactly."

I mentioned that my sister and I would be attending the Fowl Knight Festival tomorrow, and Gabriel told me to be very careful.

"Make sure you bring Wibble with you," he said.

"I will."

My sister would probably be surrounded by a large escort of knights, so I didn't need to worry about her safety.

"I wish I could accompany you," Gabriel said. "Prince Axel is arriving tomorrow, so I'll be spending the whole day attending to him. I never would have dreamed that dignitaries from multiple countries would be gathering in Triste."

"I'm sure this event will be reported on widely, both here and in the Empire. Everyone in the world will be curious about the slime duke family."

“It’s simply unbelievable.”

Our marriage was likely going to spur major growth in the region of Triste. Things were definitely going to get busier. I’d have to keep an eye on Gabriel to make sure he didn’t overwork himself while also doing my best to support him.

Gabriel finished his second glass of wine. The alcohol seemed to already be flowing through his system—his face was flushed.

“Tomorrow will be a long day too, so let’s call it a night,” I said.

“Yes. I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep, though...” His eyes had that tired, unfocused look, but apparently he wasn’t drowsy at all.

“Shall I lull you to sleep like I did this morning, then?”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?”

“Of course not.”

He had to make preparations for bed, so I waited in the room for a while. In the meantime, I called for Constance and asked her to clear the table. Even though I had offered the lap pillow so enthusiastically, I found myself growing gradually more flustered as time passed. Had I unknowingly gotten drunk from a single glass of wine? It was too late to take back the suggestion, so I was forced to endure the embarrassment as best I could.

After about fifteen minutes of waiting, Gabriel called to me, “Sorry for the wait, Fran.”

“I-It’s fine.”

The adjoining room was dimly lit by a lone slime lamp on Gabriel’s nightstand.

“Please take this lamp when you return to your room,” he said.

“Thank you.” It was my first time entering his bedroom, and I was very nervous.

“Even though I agreed to this, I feel terribly embarrassed.”

“Me too.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at our shared plight. In the first place, a man and woman weren’t supposed to be in a bedroom together before marriage. What

in the world were we doing? Perhaps so many extraordinary things had happened today that we'd lost all sense of what was normal and what was not.

"Should we stop, Fran?" Gabriel asked.

"No, I'm fine. Just watch—I'll definitely put you to sleep!"

Gabriel burst out laughing at my enthusiasm. "I'm counting on you, then."

"Yes, leave it to me."

Through our conversation, my embarrassment faded. It was time to fulfill my duty and get this man a good night's sleep.

Gabriel lay down, and I tucked him in, pulling up the blanket to cover him. I took a seat on the chair next to the bed, patted him on the back, and said in a gentle, singsong voice, "Gabriel, you worked very hard today. Sleep well..."

Repeatedly running my hand over his back, I continued to speak as if singing a lullaby. Not five minutes later, he had completely nodded off, his chest rising and falling softly at an even rhythm. He was so deeply at rest, I couldn't help but doubt whether he had been telling the truth about not being sleepy.

Apparently, I had a talent for lulling Gabriel to slumber. From then on, I'd put it to good use on nights like these when he couldn't fall asleep.

I picked up the slime lamp, stood, and silently bid him good night before leaving the bedroom.



It was the first day of the Fowl Knight Festival, and after spending so much time scrambling to finish the preparations, it was moving to see it become a reality.

Gabriel headed to the village before the festival opened to have a final meeting with the mayor and the other organizational staff. After that, he had to welcome Prince Axel, who was arriving before noon.

It was going to be a busy day.

That morning, I had breakfast with my sister, my mother, my mother-in-law,

and Mrs. Molière. Fortunately, everyone had slept well. Although I had been plagued by worries, tossing and turning on my bed for about an hour, I'd managed to fall fast asleep in the end by holding Wibble tight to my chest and closing my eyes. I had woken up in the morning feeling perfectly refreshed.

Today, my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière were going to bring my mother to see the field of sweet violets. I had invited them to go to the festival with us, but they had declined, figuring that it would be far too crowded on the first day. They asked me which day would have fewer attendees, but I had no idea, seeing as how this was the first-ever Fowl Knight Festival.

My mother, who didn't want to get jostled around among throngs of people, murmured, "Perhaps I'll go next year instead." I couldn't help but agree that that would probably be for the best.

We split up to get ready, and as I was mulling over which dress to wear, my sister came to my room.

"Is something the matter, Adele?" I asked.

"I thought of an interesting idea, Francette. Would you hear me out?"

My sister had never proposed anything to me before. I nervously wondered what she was going to say.

"How about you and I swap clothes?" she asked.

"Does that mean...disguising ourselves as each other?"

"Yes! We did it once when we were little, didn't we? I want to try it again."

Thinking back on it, we had. My sister was two years older than me, but since I had grown faster, our physiques during childhood had been similar. We had taken advantage of that to switch clothes and pretend to be each other. Since our hair colors and facial features were different, the swap had been obvious at a glance. But our attendants and nannies had played along, acting as if they hadn't noticed our ploy.

"People will be able to tell right away," I said.

"I have a wig that I use for disguising myself in public, and I should be able to adjust my height with some heels."

Even now, years later, I was still taller, but my sister was insisting that she could bridge the gap.

“If you walk around in high heels, you’ll quickly get tired,” I replied.

“I’m used to it. In the Empire, I wear them to my inspections.”

“I-I see.” Well, I couldn’t deny a request from my sister. “I don’t think we can do anything about the differences in our faces, though.”

“Makeup can solve everything. Just leave it to me.” She explained that she was good at disguising her attendant, who had to stand in for her on occasion, by applying the same makeup as her own. Today, she was going to show me that process. “We’ll never get an opportunity like this again!”

“But...” I wasn’t sure what to do. Thinking about it, if someone were to make an attempt on my sister’s life, I could be her substitute. That would be a good thing, wouldn’t it? But at the same time, I would be deceiving everyone around me. I was torn.

“Please, Francette!”

In the end, I let her pressure me into switching places.

“We might want to adjust the dress measurements a bit,” I said. As far as I could tell, my sister was slimmer than me. I didn’t know if I would fit in her clothes.

“Don’t worry. I had my dresses made a little larger, in case I ate too much during the trip.”

“That’s a relief.”

My sister brought me a bejeweled, luxurious dress, the many gems embedded upon it a specialty of the Empire. As for hers, I selected a duck-blue piece that had been the work of a tailor from the village.

“What a beautiful greenish shade of blue,” my sister remarked.

“I chose this fabric because it resembles the plumage of the ducks raised in the village,” I explained.

“Specifically for the Fowl Knight Festival?”

“Yes. I discussed it with the women in the village and decided to wear a duck-blue dress for the first day.”

“Are you sure you want to let me wear it today?”

“Of course.” I’d had several duck-blue dresses tailored, with the intention of wearing the color every day except during my wedding. So it wasn’t an issue for my sister to use this one.

“Let’s get changed right away, then.”

“Okay.”

My sister said she would lend me the wig her attendant used to masquerade as her, but I decided to have Wibble change into her hair color instead.

“You can use a slime as a wig? I’ve never heard of such a thing.”

“Just watch.”

I introduced Wibble to my sister, who was surprised to see a slime that could understand and speak a human language.

“Nice to meet you, Fra’s sister!”

“Y-Yes, likewise.”

Wibble extended its tentacle, and my sister hesitantly exchanged the equivalent of a handshake with it.

My sister and I got changed in the same room. She called for her attendant, while I asked Coco to help me. In some spots, the duck-blue dress was too big for my sister, so the attendant had to take it in. On the other hand, my sister’s dress, which had intentionally been made larger, was the perfect size for me.

“Francette, the dress isn’t too big, is it?” my sister asked.

“No, um, it fits perfectly.”

“That’s great.”

Is it really? I couldn’t help but feel awfully depressed.

After donning the dress, I had Wibble imitate my sister’s hair, transforming to match its color and length. With instructions from my sister’s attendant, it

mimicked a popular imperial hairdo.

“Not only can it turn into a wig, it can even style hair,” my sister remarked. “It’s so smart.”

“Yes, Wibble is amazing.”

“I’d like one for myself.”

There probably weren’t any other slimes as capable as Wibble. It had learned many things in its years spent with Gabriel. This slime was one of a kind.

“All right, I’m ready,” my sister said. She had finished changing into my duck-blue dress, and Coco had completed her makeup. At a glance, she did look like me—if she wore a hat, no one would realize she was someone else. “Not bad, right?”

“You look a lot more like me than I expected.”

Coco was a talented artist, skilled in every genre from cute caricatures to realistic portraits. She had probably treated my sister’s face as a canvas upon which to paint my features with makeup. I praised her, and she smiled shyly.

My makeup would be handled by my sister.

“Stay still, all right?” she said.

“I’m not a child. I know how to behave.”

“Oh, right. You were so rowdy when you were little, though. Sometimes I’d take my eyes off you for a second, and when I’d look back, you’d be gone. I would have to search for you with our nannies and attendants.”

I didn’t recall any of that, but it was probably true.

“You were a prodigy at hiding,” she continued. “We’d find you sleeping on top of dresses in a chest of drawers or tucked behind a curtain.”

“This hurts to listen to.”

By the time I was old enough to remember, my sister had already begun her queen training and had no time to play with me. But apparently, we’d spent more time together than I’d thought. Those days had surely been a lot of fun, yet I had no recollection of them whatsoever.

“You were so cute, I wanted to hug you like a stuffed animal, but you wouldn’t stay still at all,” my sister continued. “You were always running around like a puppy.”

“I-Is that so?”

While we were talking about our childhood, my sister finished my makeup. Her attendant brought me a full-length mirror.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “I look just like you!” I was amazed by how well the disguise had turned out. From a distance, anyone would mistake me for my sister.

I normally wore heels, but those would expose that I wasn’t my sister, so I had flats prepared for me instead. Meanwhile, my sister opted for heels to make up for our height difference. No one would notice that we’d switched places.

“Hey, Fran, why don’t we keep this a secret from the knights escorting us?” my sister suggested.

“Wouldn’t that be incredibly dangerous?”

“It’ll be fine! We’ll never get a chance like this again.”

“All right, but we have to bring Coco and your attendant, since they know what’s going on.”

“Not a problem.”

I told Adele’s attendant not to leave my sister’s side no matter what. I also instructed Coco to follow me closely so that we wouldn’t get separated.

“It’s also important that we truly become each other,” my sister said. Appearances alone weren’t enough—we also needed to change our ways of speaking and whatnot. “You call me Francette, and I’ll call you Adele.”

“O-Okay.” *I don’t think I’ll be able to pull it off, though...*

“Let’s practice. Starting now, we’re switching places!” She clapped her hands. “Adele, I’m looking forward to the festival.”

“Y-Yes. L-Likewise.” Despite referencing my sister’s mannerisms and way of speaking on the daily as a basis for my own, now that she was right in front of

me, I didn't know what to do.

"I'll avoid talking to you as much as possible," she said, clearly unimpressed with my acting skills. "Well then, Adele, let's go to the Fowl Knight Festival!"

I felt that her rendition of me was a bit too energetic, but perhaps that was how I seemed to others.

With that, it was time for us to attend the festival, disguised as each other.

Gabriel had entrusted me with a magical scroll that was the equivalent of his teleportation spell, so the trip to the village was instantaneous. We arrived at the village entrance, where a large crowd had already gathered.

I was fully surrounded by ten or so knights from the imperial escort, while my sister was guarded by three knights dispatched by the Crown. I'd worried that she might need more protection, but she had insisted that a small group was enough, so only an elite few had been selected.

It felt like we were going to be crushed by the crowd, but my sister seemed to be having fun. "Look at all of these people, Adele!" she exclaimed.

"It really is busy," I replied, nervous.

I was afraid that her bodyguards would discover my true identity, but they were unbelievably oblivious despite having escorted her on a regular basis. Perhaps because she always wore heels, they didn't notice any disparity in our heights.

As for my sister, there were so many women in duck-blue dresses around that no one seemed to recognize her as me.

"Adele, there are so many shops!"

"Yes, there are."

My sister was clearly excited. Apparently, this was her first time attending this type of festival. Her educator had probably forbidden it. On the other hand, growing up, I had been to several festivals in the capital. Unlike my sister's, my life had been free of responsibility.

The people coming and going were full of smiles. Planning this festival had

been a lot of work, but thankfully, everything had been prepared in time. Since it was called the Fowl Knight Festival, the stalls were selling lots of duck-themed goods. My sister took a liking to a duck mask and purchased it, saying that it would help with her disguise. Aside from that, other items on display for purchase included porcelain duck figurines, duck-shaped candies, and baked sweets.

“Look at that long line, Adele. What are they selling there?”

“Oh, that’s...”

Judging from the direction my sister was pointing, the line was likely for the Lakeside Duck Bakery’s stall. I looked to Coco for help.

“I believe that line is for the Lakeside Duck Bakery,” Coco explained. “The people are looking to buy your sweets.”

“Is that so? It’s amazing how popular they are!” my sister exclaimed, forgetting that she was supposed to be me. However, it went unnoticed thanks to the enormous crowd of people.

“Francette, are you tired?” I asked.

“No, not at all. I’m having a delightful time.”

I was glad she was enjoying herself, but personally, I was feeling uneasy due to the overwhelmingly large turnout. Swept up in the crowd, we were forced to follow the ebb and flow of the masses.

“Francette, what’s in this direction?” my sister asked, addressing me by my real name. Under these chaotic circumstances, it was understandable that her thoughts had been scrambled. And the knights were so focused on protecting us, they didn’t catch on to my sister’s blunder.

“The duck-race venue,” I replied. “Everyone is probably heading there.”

“What’s a duck race?”

“It’s an event where ducks run around a track, and whoever correctly predicts the winner is awarded sweets from the Lakeside Duck Bakery.”

“I see. We should take part too, then.”

I never expected to see my sister betting on the duck races... Well, there isn't any money involved, so I guess it's fine.

After about five minutes of walking, we arrived at the track. Many people were flocking around it, eager to watch the first race.

"Francette, it looks like the betting slips are being sold over there," my sister said, only to get swallowed up by the crowd the next moment.

"Huh? Wait, Adele?!"

Much to my horror, she had disappeared without a trace, leaving her knights and attendant behind.

"No...this can't be happening..."

The color drained from my face, and I felt dizzy. But this was no time to be frozen with shock. I had to act right away. I immediately revealed my identity to the imperial knights surrounding me.

"Um, I'm really sorry," I said. "I switched places with my sister—the crown princess! She was disguised as me, and she vanished just now!"

The knights' faces instantly turned pale as they realized the meaning of my words. They quickly began searching for my sister. I asked the knights dispatched by the Crown to aid us as well. One knight remained with me and Coco, and the three of us attempted to find my sister together.

A lady with brown hair in a half updo... "Adele?!" Grabbing someone by the shoulder who matched the description, I peered into her face. "I-I'm sorry. I got the wrong person."

The venue was full of women wearing duck-blue dresses and duck masks, and many of them had a similar hair color to mine. I couldn't tell which one was my sister.

"Wh-What do we do?!" I cried.

"Fra, calm down!"

"Y-Yes, I really should."

"Let's tell Gabriel first."

“You’re right.”

I ordered the knight accompanying us to report the situation to Gabriel and gave him the magical scroll so that he could return to the estate immediately. After watching him teleport away, I resumed the search for my sister.

“Adele! Where are you, Adele?!”

As the first duck race had just begun, the spectators’ cheers drowned out my voice.

I can’t believe she disappeared! I never should have switched places with her.

Wibble jumped up a tree to scan the area from a higher vantage point but was unable to spot my sister. Just as I was at my wit’s end, a magic circle appeared before me. I assumed the knight had returned, but instead, Gabriel emerged.

“Fran!”

Much to my surprise, he suddenly embraced me. Had something happened?

“I just received a threatening letter,” he explained. “It said, ‘We have the slime duke’s fiancée, Lady Francette. If you want her back, you must comply with our demands.’ I was scared to death!”

“A-A threatening letter?!”

“As soon as I found out you’d been kidnapped, I checked your tracking bracelet and teleported to your location.”

“But I wasn’t kidnapped.”

“Did the perpetrator mistake someone else for you, then?”

“Oh no!” I realized what the worst-case scenario could be. “What if they kidnapped Adele instead of me?!”

“What?! How in the world could they have mistaken the imperial crown princess for you?!”

“W-Well...” From the sound of it, Gabriel had teleported here before the knight I’d sent had reached him, so he didn’t know that my sister and I had switched places for the festival. I quickly explained the situation to him.

“I see.”

“I’m sorry. I was careless.”

“We can reflect on this later, after we’ve rescued the crown princess.”

“R-Right.”

The threatening letter stated that if Gabriel wanted “me” back, he had to relinquish all of the slime duke territory’s pearls and pearl cultivation materials. The exchange would take place late at night at a location yet to be specified. According to Gabriel, the letter had been delivered by a large eagle which had flown away immediately afterwards.

“Who would do such a thing?!” he exclaimed.

Very few people in Triste knew about the pearl cultivation, and outside the region, only Emilie was privy to that information. It was difficult to believe that a local resident or tourist might have committed the crime.

“Only my mother and a few of the servants are aware of the pearl cultivation, and I doubt any of them would have disclosed it to others,” said Gabriel.

“In that case...” Emilie’s mention of her troublesome uncle came to mind. “I can’t be sure yet, but I think it was probably one of the ogre duke’s relatives.” It wasn’t good to assume, but I couldn’t think of anyone else who would target the pearls aside from her family.

Gabriel gently took my hand and pressed it against his forehead. “Since you were wearing the slime crystal bracelet I gave you, I was able to find you right away.”

“Yes, that’s right.” I couldn’t say I was happy about it, though, seeing as how my sister had been kidnapped in my place.

“I’d like to search for suspicious persons, but it doesn’t seem doable, what with the festival crowds.”

“Not especially...but if someone was acting strange, as if they weren’t here for the festival, I imagine they would’ve stood out to the locals.”

“Let’s ask around the festival grounds, then.”

I entrusted Coco with a teleportation scroll and told her to inform my mother, my mother-in-law, and Mrs. Molière of the possibility that my sister had been kidnapped.

“Gabriel, let’s ask Prince Axel for help too,” I said.

“Ah, yes, let’s.”

If something were to happen to my sister, it would become an international incident. Prince Axel had arrived in the morning as planned and was staying at the slime duke family’s residence. I felt sorry for making him deal with this trouble while he was still settling in, but we really needed his assistance.

“Wibble, can you explain the situation to Prince Axel and ask him to search from the sky on his dragon?” Gabriel asked.

“Leave it to Wibble!”

Gabriel used his teleportation magic to send the slime to Prince Axel. He and I then headed for the central festival grounds.

“I’d like to call off the festival and conduct a proper investigation, but I doubt we’d be able to keep the crowds under control,” Gabriel said.

If we weren’t careful, we would only invite more chaos. It would be safer to continue with our current strategy.

Gabriel summoned his slimes and ordered them to look for my sister. He also cast an invisibility spell on them to avoid scaring the festival attendees. The many slimes scattered in different directions.

“We’ll go around and inquire with the locals,” Gabriel said. “The stalls and stores were probably too busy dealing with customers to take notice of anyone suspicious. And I imagine the culprit would have wanted to avoid getting stuck in the crowds.”

Following that reasoning, we headed for a street lined with many inns. The area was relatively deserted because the tourists were all attending the festival. We spoke to a woman selling refreshments outside one of the inns, and she said that she had been standing there serving customers all day.

“Did you see anyone suspicious in the past few hours?” I asked.

“Suspicious?”

“Perhaps they were acting strangely, dressed differently from tourists, or had a sharp look in their eyes?”

The woman thought for a bit, but when I mentioned that it might have been multiple people rather than an individual, she seemed to recall something.

“Oh, come to think of it, there were two men this morning who headed towards the forest instead of the festival,” she said. “I think one of them was middle-aged, in his fifties or so.”

“The forest?” There was dense woodland to the southwest of the village, but it tended to be full of slimes, so people typically stayed away.

“Yes. Earlier, I saw them again as they rushed by, and I wondered what they were doing. The cart they were pulling had some kind of large load on it. They seemed like they were in a hurry.”

The cargo had probably been my sister. That was a blind spot—there were many carts coming and going from the festival grounds and the duck race venue. It had never occurred to me that my sister could have been on one of them.

“They came from the direction of the festival, even though I didn’t see them return from the forest,” the woman continued. “That made it even more suspicious.”

Perhaps the culprits had used a mythical beast that could fly through the air or a special spell of some sort. We thanked the woman and left the village for the southwestern forest, which turned out to be overwhelmingly vast.

“Fran, we’ll need more people if we’re going to search here,” Gabriel said.

“Indeed...” If we went in without a plan, we’d never find my sister.

“It would be possible to search from above with Prince Axel’s dragon, but the dense trees would make it difficult to spot her.”

“Should we go back and report this to the imperial delegation and royal diplomats?”

As we were talking, a large shadow passed overhead.

“That’s—”

“It’s Prince Axel’s dragon!” I exclaimed.

I waved my hands, and Prince Axel descended, landing his dragon in the open space of the fountain square. Wibble sat atop his shoulder as he made his dashing entrance.

“Prince Axel!” I shouted on our approach.

“Sorry for the delay,” he said. “Update me on the situation.”

Gabriel told him about the sighting of the suspicious men.

Prince Axel’s suggestion surprised me. “In that case, why don’t we use the dragon’s special organ to search for their mana? I can fit one more person on my saddle, so Lord Gabriel can accompany me.”

“I’m coming too!” I replied. Naturally, I didn’t mean sitting on the dragon—Wibble would bring me along inside its body.

Prince Axel gave me a confused look.

It’ll be faster to demonstrate than to explain. “Wibble, if you please,” I said.

“*Got it!*” Wibble opened its mouth wide and swallowed me up in a single gulp.

After carefully lifting the slime and me up, Gabriel cradled us in his arms. He said to Prince Axel, “Let us make haste!”

“Right,” said Prince Axel.

We mounted the dragon to begin our overhead search.

It hasn’t been that long since my sister disappeared, so they shouldn’t have gone too far from—

The dragon shot into the sky. It had used the force of its flapping wings, forgoing any sort of running start.

“Ahhh!” I screamed, my body folding under the momentum.

“Don’t worry, Fran,” said Gabriel. “I have you.”

“R-Right, thank you.”

In no time at all, the dragon reached the forest and detected the mana of

humans within.

“There’s no space to land,” Prince Axel muttered.

Just when we were about to find them... How frustrating.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“Fran, I’m going to descend from here, but you may want to close your eyes,” said Gabriel.

“Huh?!”

“Also, clench your teeth so that you don’t bite your tongue.”

Before I could ask why, Gabriel leaned over the side of the dragon...and jumped off, carrying Wibble and me under his arm.

“What?!” I screamed. That was when I noticed Gabriel’s black slime wrapped around his upper body like a rope. The rope extended upwards, seemingly anchored to the dragon’s leg, and was currently holding us aloft.

Prince Axel shouted to us, “Wait on the ground while I call for reinforcements!”

Before I could respond, we were already plummeting down, the dragon’s figure growing more and more distant. As we approached land, Gabriel did something unexpected.

“Slimes, to me!”

He summoned a great number of slimes and had them combine into one large slime to cushion our fall.

“Fran, are you all right?” he asked.

“Y-Yes...” Wibble’s body had absorbed all of the impact for me. I wasn’t injured at all.

The black slime unraveled itself from Gabriel’s torso and returned to its original form.

“How far are we from the duck race venue?” I asked.

“About an hour by foot, perhaps? They likely used teleportation magic.”

“I see.”

“They would’ve drawn attention if they used it inside the village, so they probably went outside first. At any rate, please stay inside Wibble for the time being.”

“Understood.”

Gabriel cautiously proceeded forwards. After a bit of walking, we arrived at a small clearing.

“What?!” he exclaimed in a whisper.

There was a tent set up, with human silhouettes visible from outside. Perhaps because I was inside Wibble’s body, I felt as if my senses were heightened. I listened closely and was able to hear the figures’ voices.

“I wonder if this girl will behave until nighttime.”

“She seems like a stubborn one, so I might have to cast another sleeping spell on her.”

One of the men was in his forties or fifties, while the other was around thirty. They were wearing leather jackets, which were uncommon in this region. There was something shiny sewn into their sleeves. I told Wibble this, and it transformed into a pair of binoculars, magnifying the suspects for me.

Those are aurora pearls!

Now I could be sure that the men had come from the ogre duke’s territory. Gabriel seemed to have noticed too. He raised his finger to his lips, instructing the slimes to stay quiet.

“Fran, I’m going to capture those two,” he said. “In the meantime, can you and Wibble find the princess?”

We both nodded. My sister was undoubtedly sleeping inside the tent. I prayed that she wasn’t hurt.

Gabriel first sent the black slime out as a decoy. The long grass rustled loudly when the slime sprang forwards, startling the men.

“Whoa!”

“What the hell?!”

“*Rawrrrrr!*”

I was fairly certain that slimes didn’t normally go *rawrrrrr*, but at any rate, it had succeeded in catching the men off guard.

“What’s with this thing?! How’d it get past the ward?!”

“This must be no ordinary slime!”

The men seemed to be well-versed in magic. They wouldn’t have been able to hide in this slime-infested forest otherwise. Incidentally, tamed slimes weren’t considered monsters, so they were able to pass through monster-repelling wards without issue.

With the kidnappers distracted, Gabriel ordered his other slimes, “Capture those men!”

The slimes transformed into ropes. They ensnared the men, wholly wrapping about their bodies, and leveraged their weight over surrounding tree branches to suspend them in midair.

“Gyaaaaah!”

“Aaaaahhh!”

Gabriel shot Wibble and me a look. We hurried to the tent to see if my sister was inside.

“Adele, are you here?!”

“Ngh...”

My sister, clad in my duck-blue dress, was lying within the tent. Wibble let me out of its body, and I rushed to her side to check her condition.

“Adele, are you all right?!”

“*Fra, she’s just sleeping. Don’t worry!*”

According to Wibble, my sister was under a sleeping spell and would wake up later when it wore off. The slime transformed into a knife to cut the bindings around her hands and feet while I removed the cloth tied around her mouth. Her wrists and ankles were slightly reddened from the tight ropes, but other

than that, she seemed unharmed.

“Thank goodness!” I cried out.

However, my relief didn’t last long. The tent suddenly tilted sharply to one side, and a tremendous roar rang out, seeming to make the air shake.

“What?!”

“*Fra!*” Wibble swallowed me up and leaped out of the tent.

“Eek!”

I looked up from inside Wibble and couldn’t believe my eyes. A massive golem was lifting the tent—with my sister still inside—high in the air.

“If you don’t release us and hand over what we demanded, the girl’s dead!” one of the men shouted.

The criminals were still bound, but they were attempting to turn the tables with the golem they’d hidden underground.

“Don’t move, Slime Duke!”

“A-As long as you don’t try anything, nobody gets hurt.”

We’d come so close to apprehending them, but we’d never expected them to have a golem at the ready. Gabriel glared at the two men, a frustrated scowl coming over his face. To make matters worse, the golem had noticed Wibble’s presence and made several attempts to stomp on us.

“That pink slime isn’t allowed to move either!”

“*Grrr, not fair!*”

What could we do in this situation? The tent was being lifted quite high, and my sister would probably fall out if Gabriel were to attack the golem.

“Let us down first,” said the older man.

“Gently, please,” said the other.

The moment Gabriel raised his hand to command the slimes, something—or someone—fell from the sky.

Shouting, “What do you idiots think you’re doing?!” the new arrival drop-

kicked in, striking the older man with the force of a meteorite.

“Guh!”

“F-Father!” the other kidnapper cried in concern.

The figure then punched the younger man in the face.

“Gah!”

Still restrained by the slime-ropes, the kidnappers bobbed up and down in the air, their eyes rolling back as they both lost consciousness. They hardly mattered at this point, though—I was more startled by the identity of our visitor.

“I’m sorry we took so long!” came a familiar voice.

“Lady Emilie?!” I exclaimed. The person who had arrived out of the blue was none other than the ogre duke.

“It seems my uncle and cousin have caused a mess. I can’t apologize enough...”

As expected, the culprits had been from the ogre duke’s territory. I didn’t know what to say.

Apparently, the magic user had been Emilie’s cousin. To prevent him from casting more spells, she gagged him with a handkerchief. She gave her uncle the same treatment, but in his case, it was because she didn’t want to hear his complaints.

Gabriel immediately redirected his slimes to the golem, having them wrap it up to restrict its movements. He also had the slimes carefully pick up the tent and bring it down.

This time, I’ll save my sister, I thought as I stepped out of Wibble’s body.

“Adele! Adele!” I embraced her, tears streaming down my cheeks.

“Ngh...” My sister’s eyes slowly fluttered open. When she saw me crying, her eyes widened. “Why, what’s the matter, Francette?”

“Adele, does it hurt anywhere? Are you in any pain at all?”

“No, but really, what’s wrong?”

Apparently, my sister wasn't aware that she'd been kidnapped. The last thing she remembered was being at the duck race venue. The culprits had likely put her to sleep with a spell and teleported her here. At any rate, I was relieved that she was unharmed.

My sister looked surprised when I explained what had happened. "Francette, you came to rescue me?"

"Not just me—Gabriel and Lady Emilie also rushed here to save you."

"Lady Emilie?"

"The ogre duke. She's over there."

Emilie, having finished punishing her relatives, ran up to us and fell prostrate in front of my sister.

"Are you Emilie?" my sister asked.

"Yes, I am Emilie, the ogre duke. I deeply apologize for the trouble these lawbreaking scoundrels from my domain have caused you."

My sister hadn't yet gathered her bearings, so we decided to leave the discussion for later. First, we had to get her to a safe place. We teleported outside the forest and found Prince Axel there, just about to begin his investigation with a team of knights. Even the imperial knights had placed themselves under his command, which spoke volumes about Prince Axel's virtues.

He looked relieved when Gabriel explained that we had located my sister and apprehended the kidnappers. While they were talking, my sister was taken to a secure area by her attendant and guards.

I'm so glad we found her.

Emilie came up to me and asked, "Um, was anyone else injured?!"

"No, Gabriel, the slimes, and I are all fine thanks to you."

"Th-Thank goodness."

Apparently, Emilie had come to Triste early to assist in her bridesmaid duties. She had tried to write to me in advance to inform me, only to inadvertently

arrive in person before the letter did.

“I happened to run into the dragon duke, who told me that you and Lord Gabriel were dealing with an emergency. He explained the situation as we flew to the forest on his dragon’s back, and when I heard that someone had tried to kidnap you for the pearl cultivation materials, I just knew it had to be my uncle’s doing!” She clenched her fists and trembled with anger.

“I’m surprised you were able to survive falling from that height,” I remarked.

“Oh, that was no problem at all. In my territory, we have a hunting tradition where we jump down from cliffs to catch prey, so I’m used to it.”

“I-I see.”

At any rate, the culprits had been caught. I’d have to thank everyone who had helped us.

After my discussion with Emilie, I returned home with my sister and let our mother know that we were both safe. She was surprisingly calm—upon seeing my sister, she merely replied, “Ah, you’re back.”

“M-Mother, weren’t you shocked when you heard that Adele was missing?” I asked.

“Why, of course I was surprised. However, I had faith that you, the slime duke, and Prince Axel would bring her back safe and sound, and it looks like I was right.”

My mother-in-law had called for a doctor just in case. Even if my sister claimed she was fine, it would be better to have her examined by a medical professional.

“Adele, I’m so sorry for getting you caught up in this incident,” I said.

“It was my fault, so don’t worry about it,” my sister replied.

“That’s not true. They were after me.”

“No, I was the one who wanted to go to the festival, and I was the one who suggested switching places.” She hugged me and whispered, “I’ll do my best to prevent this from causing an international dispute. You don’t have to worry

about a thing, Francette.”

“Thank you.”

After that, my sister was entrusted to our mother and the imperial knights.

My mother-in-law had been beside herself when she’d learned that my sister had been kidnapped. “I could hardly breathe at the thought of harm befalling the imperial crown princess,” she said.

“I’m sorry for the worry we caused,” I apologized.

“You did nothing wrong, Miss Francette. It’s the kidnappers who are to blame. They are the only ones who should feel guilty.”

“I suppose...”

My mother-in-law still looked pale. Mrs. Molière gave her water to drink and began rubbing her back. I was sincerely glad that my mother-in-law had her sister by her side.

“It’s good that the princess is safe and sound, but I hope this won’t cause an international incident,” my mother-in-law murmured.

“My sister said that she would handle things,” I said. I couldn’t say I wasn’t worried, but for the time being, all I could do was trust in my sister and wait.

Later, Emilie’s uncle was investigated, and as a result, an unbelievable truth was brought to light. It turned out that he had tried to steal money from the ogre duke family’s strongbox, only to find nothing but letters—the ones Emilie and I had exchanged. That was how he had learned that Triste was producing pearls. He had believed that if he kidnapped me, then Gabriel—who was known to treasure his fiancée—would surely relinquish the pearl-cultivation technique. And so, he had attempted to carry out his plan, only to kidnap the imperial crown princess by mistake.

It was quite the serious crime. Apparently, the knight who had taken the men into custody had said, “Don’t expect to ever see the sun again.” At any rate, the Crown would decide their sentence. I sincerely hoped they would reflect on their actions and repent for their crimes.



The next day, the unthinkable happened.

The sun hadn't yet risen when my mother-in-law flew into my room in a panic.

"Miss Francette, please wake up!"

"M-Mother? What's the matter?"

"Well..."

She informed me that my sister's husband—the imperial crown prince—had flown to Triste, *alone*, on a dragon. In her words, it was less that he was visiting and more that he had barged in. He seemed to be livid that my sister had been kidnapped. He was demanding that the culprits—Emilie's uncle and cousin—be handed over to the Empire, and Gabriel and Prince Axel were trying very hard to placate him.

"I-I'll wake my sister and mother!" I exclaimed.

Wibble, who had woken up from the commotion, hopped onto my shoulder. I didn't have time to worry about my appearance. Still in my nightclothes, I rushed to the guest bedroom where my mother and sister were staying.

"Mother, Adele, we have an emergency! Adele's husband has come here on his own!"

My sister sprang up from her bed. "Francette, do my ears deceive me?"

"It seems that he came on a dragon."

"Oh my goodness..."

My mother was still sleeping soundly. I tried several times to wake her up, but her eyes refused to open. I called for my sister's attendant and asked her to prepare my sister's clothes and wake my mother. I, too, would have to change into a proper dress. I prayed that Gabriel and Prince Axel would be able to stall for a while longer.

Thirty minutes later, I hurried to the garden with my sister. The sun was

already peeking over the horizon, casting a growing light over the surroundings. The last I'd heard, the imperial prince was still on his dragon, demanding that we hand over the kidnappers and bring my sister to him.

When we finally arrived, we found a crimson dragon rearing forwards, its fangs bared. On its back was a well-built young man with red hair. Facing them was Prince Axel, also atop his dragon, desperately trying to calm the imperial prince. Gabriel stood between the two dragons, doing his best to defuse the situation.

As I was wondering what to say, my sister yelled, "Mochiko, sit!"

The red dragon immediately lowered its body and sat down as instructed.

"M-Mochiko?" I repeated.

"That's the dragon's name," my sister explained.

Setting the name aside—since it really didn't matter—I watched as the imperial prince spotted my sister and leaped off his steed.

"Adele!" he shouted, running in our direction. He closed the significant distance between us and the dragon in no time at all.

"Why are you here, Your Highness?" my sister asked.

"I couldn't stay put when I heard that you'd been kidnapped."

He must have flown here without informing anyone. Upon closer inspection, his face was pale, and his bloodshot eyes were underscored with dark circles. He'd likely been unable to sleep and had rushed here.

I can't believe he went to such lengths for my sister. He loves her more than I thought.

Just as I was wondering if my sister would be moved to tears, a loud *smack* echoed into the morning sky. Shockingly, my sister had delivered a powerful slap to her husband's cheek.

"A-Adele?" the imperial prince stammered.

"Why would you do something so irresponsible?!" my sister shouted, her voice seeming to make the air tremble.

The imperial prince's eyes widened.

Without missing a beat, my sister pointed her finger at him and continued, "I'm sure you came here without telling anyone, letting your emotions get the better of you, didn't you?"

"Y-Yes, I did, in fact."

"Because of your selfishness, the palace must be in a state of chaos right about now! Did I not send you a letter saying that I was fine? Why didn't you wait for me to return to the Empire?!"

"Uh, well..."

"Your sudden arrival is causing problems for the slime duke's household as well!"

"But—"

"I cannot *believe* that you woke Prince Axel and the slime duke up so early in the morning!"

The imperial prince's gaze darted around before settling on me. For some reason, there was a pleading look in his eyes. Why was he asking for help from someone he didn't know?

As it turned out, he wasn't the only one who wanted me to do something about the situation. Standing behind him, Gabriel and Prince Axel were directing the same expression towards me.

My sister was furious in a way I hadn't seen before. I didn't know if I could stop her.

She continued to hurl criticisms at her husband, her anger showing no sign of subsiding. The almighty imperial crown prince now looked like a puppy being scolded for misbehaving. I was starting to feel bad for him, so I tried to placate my sister.

"Adele, he seems to be sorry for what he did, so why don't we leave it at that?" I asked, squeezing her arm.

"I suppose you're right," she replied plainly. Perhaps she had been so enraged that she simply hadn't known when to stop. She took her husband's arm and

said to Prince Axel and Gabriel, “It appears that His Highness has caused you a great deal of trouble this morning. Please allow us to issue a formal apology later.”

Prince Axel and Gabriel insisted that an apology wouldn’t be necessary, but my sister left no room for argument. Meanwhile, the imperial crown prince had become docile, his previous aggression completely gone. It was as if his soul had left his body.

I was relieved that the situation had been resolved without incident.

Chapter 4: The Noble Lady Francette Weds the Slime Duke Gabriel

My sister was able to prevent the incident from escalating further, and the imperial crown prince gained a full understanding of the event after several discussions with Gabriel and Prince Axel. I also heard that Emilie formally apologized to the imperial prince and my sister. Her uncle and cousin were in the knights' custody for the time being. They would likely face a domestic trial later on.

Everything had been settled, but I was only afforded a brief respite before it was suggested that the imperial prince attend our wedding. The Empire didn't want it to look like their crown prince had impulsively flown to Triste by himself without any real thought. The prince agreed, and thus, our wedding day was slated to have quite the impressive lineup of guests. It also meant that security had to be tightened—a large number of knights came to Triste from the Empire to serve that purpose. They were accustomed to setting up camp during expeditions, so we didn't need to provide food or shelter for them. Not only did they take care of themselves, they even exterminated wild slimes in their free time. I couldn't thank them enough.

Surprisingly, the imperial prince seemed to be enjoying his stay in Triste. Apparently, he was treating it as a honeymoon trip with my sister, since they hadn't been able to have one when they'd gotten married. We obviously couldn't let him attend the festival, but we set up a duck racetrack in the mansion's yard and held a simplified version of the tournament for our honored guests. Naturally, Alexandrine did her part in wowing the audience with her feats of speed. The imperial prince predicted the winner correctly and was rewarded with an assortment of the Lakeside Duck Bakery's sweets. He seemed happy to have a souvenir to bring back to the Empire.

The imperial prince also showed interest in Gabriel's slime products and expressed a desire to adopt them in the Empire. With both him and the

delegation here, our nations were brought much closer together. It helped that the imperial prince had apparently showered Gabriel's inventions with praise.

Gabriel murmured that he thought he must have been dreaming, so Wibble and I hugged him to show that this was still reality. With that, he finally understood that the imperial prince's recognition hadn't been a dream.

The rest of the enjoyable week passed by in the blink of an eye, and at last, it was our wedding day. I'd worried that I wouldn't be able to get any sleep the night before, but after drinking with my sister, I'd easily dozed off.

In the morning, Nico, Rico, and Coco came to congratulate me.

"Lady Francette, the weather is splendid today—perfect for your wedding," said Nico.

"We've been so eagerly awaiting this day," said Rico.

"You have our heartfelt congratulations," said Coco.

"Thank you so much," I replied. "I'm so happy."

Their words really made it sink in that I was finally getting married to Gabriel. How many times had I dreamed of this day?

"Lady Francette, it's sure to be a long day," said Nico. "Please have a hearty breakfast so you don't collapse!"

"Thank you, Nico."

Nico's cheerfulness and ever-present smile always brightened her surroundings. Thanks to her love for animals, Alexandrine had been able to live comfortably at all times after moving to this unfamiliar land.

"We've had all of your favorite dishes prepared today, Lady Francette," said Rico.

"Thank you, Rico."

Rico was the most levelheaded of the triplets. I knew I could trust her to handle any task I assigned. There were many times I sincerely appreciated having her by my side.

“Lady Francette, um, it’s not much, but I made this small portrait of you and Lord Gabriel to celebrate your wedding,” Coco said, hesitantly showing me her painting. It depicted Gabriel and me holding hands and smiling, like a moment of happiness forever recorded on canvas.

“This is amazing, Coco! Thank you.”

Coco had considerable artistic talent, to the point where a noble from the capital had once offered her enough money for a lifetime of luxury if she became their exclusive painter. However, she had chosen to decline and continue to serve the slime duke family. She had said that it was to repay me for discovering her talent, but I didn’t want her to be beholden to that. One day, I’d have to prepare an environment where she could paint to her heart’s content.

“Nico, Rico, Coco, it’s thanks to you three that I’ve been able to live so comfortably in Triste. I’m truly grateful.”

The triplets’ eyes were moist with tears.

“We’ve had so much fun every day ever since you came,” said Nico.

“All of the other workers have had brighter expressions too,” said Rico.

“It’s all because of you, Lady Francette,” said Coco.

The three bowed in unison.

I’d had no idea they felt that way. My heart was filled with warmth.

“Oh no,” I said. “The ceremony hasn’t even begun, but I’m already about to cry.”

“Us too!”

Letting my tears fall would make my face swell, so I had to rein in my emotions. When I suggested talking about something fun, Nico mentioned that the Alexandrine dolls and masks at the Fowl Knight Festival were very popular with the children.

After an enjoyable breakfast, Constance brought me my postmeal tea.

“Lady Francette, congratulations on your marriage,” she said. On the table

next to the tea, she placed a vase of flowers—den-phal orchids. They symbolized “a perfect couple.” I couldn’t help but think it was a very Constance felicitation.

“You’ve helped me so much ever since I arrived here, Constance. I couldn’t have come so far without you.”

“I am undeserving of your praise.”

Our lady steward typically gave off a stoic impression, but she was a hard worker and extremely thoughtful. I truly needed her in my life. When I thanked her, she responded with a faint smile. I would’ve liked to talk to her more, but as she informed me of the day’s schedule, I realized there was no time to spare for idle chatter.

After breakfast, I took a bath, where every last bit of my body was scrubbed down. Next came a hair trim and a manicure, followed by a full-body massage and a substantial lunch. Then I was told that it would be best to take a short nap. I didn’t think it would be possible to so easily nod off during the afternoon, seeing as how I’d never done so before. However, I ended up sleeping very soundly, and when I awoke, my morning fatigue had completely dissipated.

Now that I felt fully refreshed, it was time to begin changing into my attire for the wedding. Nico, Rico, Coco, and Constance all helped me dress. Although I had tried everything on before, I still felt nervous as I passed my arms through the gown’s sleeves.

Next, my attendants covered my dress with a sheet before they applied my makeup and arranged my hair. The last step was to put on my accessories, but this was traditionally done by family members, so my mother and sister had been called over in advance.

“Oh my, Francette,” said my mother. “That dress looks gorgeous on you.”

“It really does,” said my sister. “You’re beautiful, Francette.”

Their praise made me feel hopelessly embarrassed.

My mother helped me with the earrings, while my sister fastened the clasp of a necklace at my nape.

Teary-eyed, my sister said, “Francette, promise me you’ll have a happy marriage.”

“I will,” I replied.

“If you ever get into a fight, you’re welcome to run away to the Empire,” my mother added.

“I hope Gabriel and I can continue to get along, then, so that it won’t come to that.”

“Yes, that would be best.”

I took their words to heart.

My mother and sister left, and my mother-in-law and Mrs. Molière came to take their place.

“Why, Miss Francette!” my mother-in-law exclaimed. “What a stunning ensemble!”

“Yes!” Mrs. Molière agreed. “You look just like a princess!”

I couldn’t help but feel moved by the thought that we had all worked together to make this wedding dress a reality.

“Mrs. Molière, thank you for all of your assistance when I was preparing to move to Triste. I’m so grateful that you so warmly accompanied me in buying everything I needed.”

“Think nothing of it! I had a wonderful time too!”

If Mrs. Molière hadn’t put so much effort into choosing clothes for me, I would have struggled to put together an outfit worthy of greeting Prince Axel or the imperial prince in. Thanks to her, I hadn’t lacked anything and was able to live luxuriously in Triste.

“Miss Francette, please look after Gabby for us,” she continued.

“You can leave him to me.”

I looked at my mother-in-law and found that, although I had yet to say anything to her, she already had tears in her eyes.

“Mother, thank you so much for doting on me as if I were your real daughter,”

I said.

“It’s only natural—you’re my son’s bride, after all. How could I not hold you dear? Although, had we met in the capital as strangers, I feel we still would have grown close. That’s the kind of wonderful lady you are. I’m truly happy that you chose to be a part of our family.”

“Mother...”

Even though Constance had told me, “You mustn’t cry. It will ruin your makeup,” tears immediately welled up in my eyes.

“Miss Francette, please continue to take on any challenge your heart desires,” my mother-in-law said. “I will always be on your side, even if Gabriel objects. I will fight him with all my might if that is what it takes to protect you.”

I couldn’t help but giggle at her zealous declaration. It made my budding tears dry, and for that I was grateful. *I have such a dependable mother-in-law.*

Lastly, my mother-in-law placed a pearl tiara and long veil atop my head. With that, my bridal ensemble was finally complete.

Constance brought me a full-length mirror. “How is it, Lady Francette?”

“Oh my!”

The lake pearls sparkled as they caught the sunlight shining in from the window. Threaded alongside them, the silver embroidery, which we had worked on one stitch at a time, was breathtaking, and the pearls scattered across the veil looked like shooting stars.

I couldn’t help but feel like I wasn’t myself. Perhaps acknowledging my own beauty this one time could be permitted, since my current appearance was the combined work of everyone present.

“Thank you all for making me look so beautiful!” I exclaimed.

Everyone smiled gently at me. It seemed that Gabriel had finished his preparations too, so Constance went to call him over. The others left the room as well.

I fidgeted as I waited. Before long, there was a quiet knock at the door.

“Fran, may I come in?” Gabriel asked.

“Y-Yes, you may.”

The door opened slowly, revealing Gabriel in a pure-white tuxedo. He was also carrying Wibble. As soon as he spied me upon entering the room, his gaze filled with awe.

“Fran...you are the most beautiful bride in the entire world.”

“Thank you. You’re looking very handsome too.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Kneeling before me, he continued to lavish me with praise. “I’m starting to doubt whether you truly exist.”

“Now you’re exaggerating.”

“I’m doing no such thing!”



He added that the lake pearls only further enhanced my beauty. “Thank goodness we made it in time.”

“Indeed.”

These pearls had been completed with Emilie’s cooperation and Gabriel’s painstaking efforts. They would surely become my precious treasures.

“Wibble, you came to see me too?” I asked the slime, who had been silent thus far.

“Gabriel was nervous, so Wibble came with him!”

“I see.” What an adorable reason for the two of them to arrive together.

“For the record, I told it not to tell you that,” Gabriel said.

“Don’t you know Wibble can’t keep secrets?”

“I suppose you’re right.”

The ceremony was fast approaching.

“Let’s go, Fran,” said Gabriel.

“Yes.”

I placed my fingertips in his outstretched hand. Together, we rode a white carriage—prepared just for this day—to the region’s only chapel.



Gabriel disappeared inside, while I headed for the area in front of the chapel’s entrance. The long dress and veil made it difficult to walk, but fortunately, I had my bridesmaids, Solene and Emilie, to help me. The two of them were wearing shell-pink dresses that resembled wedding dresses—bridesmaids were meant to look similar to the bride in order to deceive evil spirits targeting her. They would accompany me down the aisle first.

“Fran, you look so beautiful.”

“Thank you, Solene.”

Emilie looked at my wedding dress, adorned with the finished lake pearls, with tears in her eyes. “Lady Francette, the pearl dress suits you perfectly!”

“It’s thanks to you that I’m able to wear it, Lady Emilie. I’m truly grateful.”

“I should be the one thanking you.”

Emilie explained that the ogre duke’s territory had adopted Gabriel’s pearl-cultivation technique. Just the other day, they had succeeded in producing new aurora pearls. It was only a matter of time before they reentered the market.

The chapel bell rang, and at the same time, the doors swung open. Majestic pipe organ music filled the air as I walked inside, accompanied by Solene and Emilie. Wibble and the other slimes helped me by lifting the back of my veil and the train of my dress. Solene quietly instructed them to bounce in rhythm with the music.

Gabriel, who was waiting midway down the aisle, held out his hand to me. I thanked Solene and Emilie and parted from them. Hand in hand, Gabriel and I walked down the rest of the aisle, finally reaching the altar, where we would swear our eternal love.

“Gabriel de Griet Slime, do you take Francette de Blanchard for your lawful wife, in sickness and in health, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, to love her, to honor her, and to stand by her all the days of your life?”

“I do.” There was no hesitancy in his voice.

Next, the same question was asked of me.

“Francette de Blanchard, do you take Gabriel de Griet Slime for your lawful husband, in sickness and in health, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, to love him, to honor him, and to stand by him all the days of your life?”

“I do.”

I knew the days to come wouldn’t all be sunshine and rainbows, but I was sure that together we could overcome anything.

The priest turned to the attendees and said, “Should anyone object to this marriage, speak now or forever hold your peace.”

As the chapel fell silent, I suddenly realized that both of the seats reserved for our fathers were empty. Gabriel seemed to notice too—disappointment clouded his features for a brief moment. However, his sharp, formal expression

quickly returned.

No one objected to the marriage, so the ceremony ended there. Once we were outside, the attendees showered us with flower petals. Among them was a familiar face: my father. Apparently he hadn't been able to arrive in time for the ceremony itself. His attendant, André, was standing behind him, but there was also another man with them who seemed to be around the same age as my father. *Could it be...?*

"Gabriel, do you know who that man is?!" I asked.

"Yes, he's my father."

My father gave Gabriel's father a firm push on the back. Gabriel rushed forwards at the same time and embraced his father.

"Father, where have you been all this time?!" Gabriel exclaimed.

"I'm sorry, Gabriel... I'm truly sorry."

Thank goodness he made it in time.

When the detective had reported that he had been unable to locate Gabriel's father, I had written a letter to my own right away. I had known that it was an unreasonable request, but my father had a vast web of connections, so I had hoped that—if he really put his mind to it—he might be able to find this elusive man.

My father had written to me frequently with progress updates. The last letter had come a week ago, and in it, he had reported that he might have tracked down Gabriel's father. Since they hadn't attended the ceremony, I had given up hope, assuming that he had failed. I'd never expected that they would turn up late.

However, not everyone was sure to be happy about this reunion. I scanned the sea of guests and spotted my mother-in-law watching the father and son embrace, an exasperated look on her face. She didn't seem angry, though, much to my relief.

"Father, welcome back," said Gabriel.

"Thank you. Sorry I'm late for your wedding."

“Extremely late, you mean.”

The two chuckled among themselves, their touching reunion marking the completion of our wedding at the chapel.

After that, the residents of Triste were invited to the reception party. As the theme of our wedding, they were our honored guests. I was overjoyed to see them eating to their hearts’ content and chatting excitedly.

“Look, Gabriel,” I said. “Everyone appears to be enjoying themselves.”

“Yes, it’s like a dream come true.”

This was exactly the wedding we’d been hoping for.



The banquet with the residents was very lively. The children were elated to be able to eat all the sweets they wanted, while the adults enjoyed the delicious cooking and wine.

The slimes performed a celebratory dance for us. Apparently they had been practicing for quite a while, with Wibble leading the group. I couldn’t have asked for a more adorable show. Musical performers and acrobats had been invited to the reception too, and the event ended in high spirits.

The day had passed in the blink of an eye. I was soaking in the bath Constance had drawn for me and reflecting on the joyful wedding ceremony and reception. The greatest happiness, though, was the fact that I had finally become Gabriel’s wife.

Stepping out of the bath, I donned the pure-white chemise that had been prepared for this night. Wearing just this was embarrassing, so I slipped a dressing gown over it.

My husband was already waiting for me in the bedroom.

“Gabriel?” I called out to him.

“Yes?!”

Apparently I had startled him. Perhaps he had been in a daze after everything

that had happened today.

It was my first time seeing him with his hair down. I reached for his hand and found it to be freezing.

“Your hand is so cold,” I said. “Are you all right?”

“I...may be nervous.”

“I see.” Having just gotten out of the bath, I was still warm. I decided to wrap my hands around his to heat them up as we talked.

“It seems that you found my father, Fran. Thank you.”

“Was I meddling too much?”

“No, not at all! Um, I’d been prepared to scold my father if I ever laid eyes on him again, but when I saw him in the flesh, my joy took precedence.”

Apparently, since leaving Triste, Gabriel’s father had led a life of abstinence, which included never drinking so much as a single drop of alcohol. He’d been working at an orphanage on the outskirts of the capital.

“He apologized to my mother as well,” Gabriel said. “She seemed oddly content when I saw her last.”

“That’s good.”

“He also promised to visit again. I’m thinking of seeing him in the capital too—will you come with me when I do?”

“Of course!” I hadn’t thought Gabriel would be so happy about reuniting with his father. It had been worth working up the courage to take action.

“So many people gave us their blessings today. It was truly touching.”

“I feel the same way.”

Years ago, when my sister’s engagement to Prince Mael had been broken, I had thought that my life was over. But that wasn’t true—Gabriel had welcomed me as his bride, and our wedding ceremony had been happier than I ever could have asked for.

Gabriel looked at me with a passionate gaze. “Fran—Francette, I will treasure you forever.”

“I’ll do everything I can for you too, Gabriel.”

We sealed our eternal vow with a kiss.

Marriage wasn’t a guarantee of a happy future; it was merely the start of a new life together. What really mattered was how a husband and wife chose to live that life. But regardless of what hardships the future had in store, I knew I could overcome anything with Gabriel at my side. And any joys that came my way, I would be able to share with him as well.

I felt strangely confident in the future. My life would surely be the happiest in the entire world.



Afterword

Hello, I'm Mashimesa Emoto.

Thank you so much for buying *A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady: Volume 3*.

This third volume revolved around pearl cultivation and the preparations for Francette and Gabriel's wedding.

As I wrote in the first volume's afterword, this story was originally meant to end with a "happy engagement" as per the title. It was supposed to be a stand-alone volume, so I feel truly fortunate to have been able to continue writing it all the way to Francette and Gabriel's marriage.

Kasumi Nagi-sensei provided a gorgeous cover illustration once again. Francette is so beautiful in her wedding dress! Gabriel looks dashing too, and the slimes celebrating with them are adorable. It's the perfect cover. Thank you so much, Kasumi Nagi-sensei!

There are a lot of leftover pages for the afterword this time, so this may be sudden, but I'd like to write about what a typical day in my life entails.

First, I wake up at around 8 a.m., but I don't get out of bed right away. Instead, I lie around for an hour or so.

At about 9 a.m., I get up, brush my teeth, wash my face, and have breakfast. I get most of my news online, so I usually watch YouTube instead while I eat.

I usually begin work around 10 a.m. I hear that freelancers should change out of their pajamas even if they don't plan on going outside, because it lets you switch into work mode more easily. However, I don't worry about that and spend the whole day in my pajamas anyway. I'm very lazy. I truly respect those who can change clothes even if they aren't going out.

After that, I might eat lunch, or I might not. Then I continue working, and at around 2 to 3 p.m., I take the nap I've been waiting for all day. I nap almost

daily, sometimes for as long as two hours. I need a lot of sleep, so this afternoon nap is very important. And since I'm wearing my pajamas, I can sleep well.

When I wake up, I take a bath and have dinner. I work some more from about 9 to 11:30 p.m., stay up for a couple more hours, and go to sleep between 1 to 2 a.m.

That concludes a day in my life. I've kept it a secret thus far because it's embarrassing to spend the entire day in my pajamas. This is my first time revealing it to the public. Please do not tell anyone about what you have read here. I'm sorry I'm writing about this in the final volume...

The manga adaptation of *A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady* by Niso Tanuda-sensei is currently being serialized. The manga version of Wibble is very cute and soothes my soul every time I see it. Francette is very sweet, and Gabriel looks wonderful too.

As a reader, I'm looking forward to seeing how the rest of the story will be depicted. It's serialized on the Japanese website Fire CROSS, so please check it out.

Lastly, to all of my readers, thank you for reading this far! It's because of your support that I was able to bring you Francette and Gabriel's happy marriage! I hope to see you again in one of my other works.











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A Surprisingly Happy Engagement for the Slime Duke and the Fallen Noble Lady: Volume 3

by Mashimesa Emoto

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